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The Reform Project of the Jurist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Maghili in the Islamic Kingdom of Songhay during the Tenth/Sixteenth Century

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Abstract

This study examines the movement for reform and religious renewal led by Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Maghili in the Islamic Kingdom of Songhay. It focuses on his fatwas to Askia Muhammad al-Turi. The Algerian historian Abd al-Qadir Zabadia compiled and critically edited these questions and responses under the title Askia's Questions and al-Maghili's Answers. They addressed religious, political, cultural, social, and economic life. These interventions helped give the institutions and practices of the state an Islamic character. They also contributed to the emergence of a jihad movement led by Askia Muhammad himself against the peoples and kingdoms practicing indigenous religions in the Niger Bend.

Keywords: Western Sudan; Songhay; Imam al-Maghili; Askia Muhammad; reform and renewal.

Introduction:

The Western Sudan encompasses a substantial part of the African Sahara, which Islam reached alongside other regions of the contemporary world. Northern and southern Africa appear to have maintained close connections since antiquity. These ties strengthened with the emergence and geographical expansion of Islam. Yet the region's distance from the main centers of Islamic civilization and its difficult terrain limited the attention it received compared with other Islamic lands. This helps explain the scarcity of historical material on the region. Although Islam reached it, its influence fluctuated. Earlier religions survived in certain areas, particularly indigenous forms of worship. The spread of Islam also encouraged new currents of thought. Scholars mobilized their efforts to advance the faith and consolidate its foundations. Among them was Muhammad al-Maghili, a prominent scholar from Algeria. The Kingdom of Songhay was one of the destinations on his Saharan journey. There, as elsewhere, he sought to revive the Sunna and eradicate religious innovation.

Historical writing recognizes the contribution of these figures to the Islamic world, particularly Saharan Africa. Many studies, especially recent ones, have examined important aspects of al-Maghili's life and his struggle on behalf of Islam. His influence extended across different periods, places, and communities. This study focuses on the final destination of his Saharan reform activity: Islamic Songhay. What reforms did al-Maghili undertake there? How did he pursue them? Which areas did they address? How did they affect the various aspects of life within the state?

I. The Intellectual Foundations of Muhammad al-Maghili's Reform Movement: Fatwas and Authorship:

1. Al-Maghili "Birth and Early Life":

Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad al-Maghili al-Tilimsani belonged to the Maghila tribe near Tlemcen. He was born and raised there, although the sources do not specify his date of birth. He devoted his youth to memorizing the Qur'an and pursuing learning. His teachers included Abd al-Rahman al-Tha'alibi and Shaykh Yahya ibn Yadir. He became a leading scholar and jurist, as well as a Qur'anic exegete and theologian.¹ He traveled to

¹ Al-Timbukti, Ahmad Baba (d. 1036 AH, or 1032 AH according to another account). Nayl al-ibtiḥaj bi-tatriz al-Dibaj [Attaining Delight through Embellishing al-Dibaj]. Supervised and introduced by Abd al-Hamid Abd Allah al-Harama. Tripoli: Publications of the Faculty of Islamic Da'wa, 1st ed., 1989, pp. 576–579. Al-Zirikli, Khayr al-Din. Al-A'lam: Qamus tarajim li-ashhar al-rijal wa-al-nisa' min al-'Arab wa-al-musta'ribin wa-al-mustashriqin [Notable Figures: A

Tuat. Following his conflict with its Jewish community and jurists,¹ he left for the Sudan. On reaching Takedda, he devoted himself to teaching. His students included Muhammad ibn Abi Muhammad al-Tazakhti, al-Aqib ibn Abd Allah al-Ansammani al-Massufi, and Umar al-Shaykh al-Kunti.²

He then continued south through the Western Sudan, undertaking reform wherever he went. He left a substantial scholarly legacy. His works include al-Badr al-munir fi 'ulum al-tafsir [The Luminous Moon in the Sciences of Qur'anic Exegesis], Misbah al-arwah fi usul al-falah [The Lamp of Souls on the Foundations of Salvation], Sharh Mukhtasar Khalil [Commentary on Khalil's Compendium], and Tanbih al-ghafilin 'an makr al-mulabbisin bi-da'wa maqamat al-'arifin [Alerting the Heedless to the Deceit of Those Who Falsely Claim the Stations of the Gnostics]. He also wrote many other works, including two devoted to the Sudan that this study discusses. He returned to Tuat and, according to the most likely account,³ died there in 909 AH/1503 CE.⁴

1. The Dialogue between Imam al-Maghili and the Ruler of Songhay, Askia al-Hajj Muhammad:

Al-Maghili's scholarly standing placed him among the leading jurists qualified to issue fatwas. This is evident in two works whose titles indicate their subject matter. The first, addressed to the ruler of Kano, is Taj al-din fi-ma yajib al-'ala al-muluk wa-al-salatin [The Crown of Religion: The Duties of Kings and Sultans]. The second, addressed to Askia Muhammad of Songhay, is As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili [Askia's Questions and al-Maghili's Answers].⁵ The latter is the principal subject of this study. Its fatwas reflect circumstances reported to al-Maghili and perhaps witnessed by him in Songhay. His reform program took the form of guidance from a jurist and mufti to a ruler seeking to apply Islamic principles throughout his government. Al-Maghili organized the work into seven questions, each followed by an answer. They set out Islamic legal rulings on different aspects of life. Most of this guidance concerned the ruler's policies and the rules he should follow as the person ultimately responsible for the land and its people.

The work is therefore both a legal and a historical source. Its value extends across the various fields it addresses. It is an important historical document for the Western Sudan. It also provides an overview of conditions under the Sunni rulers, particularly the last of them, Sunni Ali. It describes the oppression and enslavement experienced by his subjects, social stratification, the concentration of wealth among some groups at the expense of others, and the limited level of learning in the country at that time.

The historical and biographical sources available to us do not establish the date of the correspondence or the composition of the work. An approximate date can nevertheless be inferred from the sequence of events and the conclusions of its editor, Zabadia. He states that al-Maghili reached Gao and met al-Hajj Askia in 908 AH/ 1502 CE.⁶ Al-Maghili returned to Tuat the following year after his son Abd al-Jabbar was killed by Jews. The exchange probably occurred in 908–909 AH/ 1502–1503 CE, as Yahya Bouaziz also suggests in his History of Islamic West Africa.⁷ Whatever its exact date, it remains an important and reliable source. It is indispensable for the study of the legal or political history of the Western Sudan and of Songhay during this period.

The work reveals the policies Askia Muhammad intended to adopt. His repeated requests for answers demonstrate his determination to understand the issues he submitted to the jurist. This represented a step forward for Islam and for

Biographical Dictionary of Prominent Arab Men and Women, Arabists, and Orientalists]. Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm li-al-Malayin, 15th ed., 2002, vol. 6, p. 216.

¹ He held that the Jews had no valid protected status (dhimma). He attacked them in Tuat, subjected them to humiliation, destroyed their synagogues, and declared their lives and property forfeit. He consulted leading jurists in Fez, Tunis, and Tlemcen. The issue generated considerable scholarly debate, with some supporting him and others opposing him. See Ibn Askar, Muhammad al-Hasani al-Shafshawni (d. 986 AH/1578 CE). Dawhat al-nashir li-mahasin man kana bi-al-Maghrib min mashayikh al-qarn al-'ashir [The Spreading Tree: The Merits of the Maghribi Shaykhs of the Tenth Century]. Edited by Muhammad Hajji. Rabat: Matbu'at Dar al-Maghrib, 2nd ed., 1397 AH/1977 CE, pp. 130–131. Al-Timbukti, Nayl al-ibitihaj, pp. 576–577.

² Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad. Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami fi al-Sudan al-Gharbi [Arab-Islamic Influence in the Western Sudan]. Benghazi: Dar al-Kutub al-Wataniyya, 1st ed., 1937 [date as given in the source], p. 268.

³ Ibn Askar, followed by al-Hudayki, places this at the beginning of the second decade of the tenth/sixteenth century. See Ibn Askar, Dawhat al-nashir, p. 132. Al-Hudayki, Muhammad ibn Ahmad (d. 1189 AH/1775 CE). Tabaqat al-Hudayki [Al-Hudayki's Biographical Dictionary]. Introduction and critical edition by Ahmad Boumazgou. Matba'at al-Najah al-Jadida, 1st ed., 1427 AH/2006 CE, vol. 1, p. 246.

⁴ Al-Timbukti, Nayl al-ibitihaj, p. 577. Ibn Maryam, Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Sharif al-Maliti al-Madyuni al-Tilimsani (d. between 1025 and 1028 AH). Al-Bustan fi dhikr al-awliya' wa-al-'ulama' bi-Tilimsan [The Garden: Saints and Scholars of Tlemcen]. Reviewed by Muhammad ibn Abi Shanab. Algiers: al-Matba'a al-Tha'alibiyya, edition unspecified, 1326 AH/1908 CE, p. 255.

⁵ Al-Timbukti, Nayl al-ibitihaj, p. 577.

⁶ Al-Maghili, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim (d. 909 AH). As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili [Askia's Questions and al-Maghili's Answers]. Introduction and critical edition by Abd al-Qadir Zabadia. Algiers: al-Sharika al-Wataniyya, edition unspecified, 1974, p. 6.

⁷ Bouaziz, Yahya. Tarikh Ifriqiya al-Gharbiyya al-Islamiyya min matla' al-qarn al-sadis 'ashar ila matla' al-qarn al-'ishrin [History of Islamic West Africa from the Early Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Century]. Algiers: Dar al-Basa'ir, edition unspecified, 2008, p. 36.

those seeking to restore its standing and that of its adherents. The effort was especially significant in a region far from the main route of Islam's expansion from east to west. The work of al-Maghili and similar scholars formed part of a tradition transmitted across generations. Their contributions should remain present in the minds of later generations as examples worthy of study and emulation. Researchers have a role in recognizing these achievements and explaining the efforts behind them. Accordingly, this study discusses and analyzes al-Maghili's contribution through a thematic structure that highlights his efforts in each field.

II. Manifestations of Muhammad al-Maghili's Reform Thought and Their Impact on the Islamic Kingdom of Songhay:

The Kingdom of Songhay lay on both banks of the Niger, north of Dahomey around Dendi, south of Upper Volta, and north of Nigeria. Like Ghana and Mali, it responded to Islam and to Arab-Islamic cultural influences from North Africa. Before Islam, it had practiced indigenous religions since the seventh century CE. A dynasty known as the Daya ruled until 1325 CE, with Kukiya as its capital. Islam reached the kingdom during the reign of Zakass, marking its first step toward Islamization. Successive rulers followed until Sunni Ali (1466–1492 CE, as stated in the source). A new ruling house, the Sunni dynasty, came to power.¹ Its last ruler is regarded as the kingdom's true founder. From his accession, he worked to consolidate its foundations. Under him, Songhay began to expand at the expense of neighboring tribes. A formidable warrior, he fought the Tuareg and recovered Timbuktu in 869 AH/ 1465 CE.²

Historical accounts nevertheless describe Sunni Ali as an oppressive ruler. Al-Hasan al-Wazzan conveys this in his general account of Africa south of the Sahara. He credits King Askia Abu Bakr with freeing the Black peoples from the domination of the chiefs of the Libyan tribes, by which the article understands the Sunni rulers. This description indicates the severity of the oppression endured by the population. After Sunni Ali's death in 897 AH/ 1492 CE, his son Abu Bakr succeeded him. One of his leading commanders, Nuri Muhammad (899 AH/ 1493 CE–930 AH/ 1528 CE, as stated in the source), rebelled against him, killed him, and seized the throne.³ Thus ended the Za dynasty, which had ruled Songhay for approximately eight centuries, and the Askia dynasty took its place.⁴ This brief overview provides the context needed to understand the changes associated with the reform movement.

Al-Maghili was deeply troubled by conditions in a land that, in his view, retained little of Islam beyond its name. He resolved to address this situation and devoted his efforts to the service of God and Islam. Ibn Askar summarizes his character: "He was resolute in commanding right and forbidding wrong".⁵ In pursuing this objective, al-Maghili met Muhammad al-Turi, the kingdom's ruler. The latter, whom the authors also regard as providentially appointed to advance Islam, rejected the policies of his Sunni predecessors. He adopted a policy of associating with contemporary jurists and scholars, drawing close to them, consulting them, and following their guidance. This relationship is reflected in Askia's Questions and al-Maghili's Answers. Sources close to the period state: "He then traveled to the lands of Takrur and reached Gao. He met its sultan, Askia Muhammad al-Hajj, and continued his practice of commanding right and forbidding wrong. He composed a work answering questions for him".⁶

Why did Askia Muhammad select al-Maghili rather than another scholar to support his political program? An earlier study of sub-Saharan Africa raised this question⁷ and answered it by examining al-Maghili's distinctive qualities. His scholarly reputation rivaled that of scholars in the Islamic East. His exchange with Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti over logic illustrates this standing.⁸ He was also known for his forceful campaign against the Jews of Tuat. Al-Mabrouk al-Dali further suggests that Askia sought the support of the shaykhs of the Qadiriyya order and the influential Kunta tribe. He

¹ He is said to have adopted the title Sunni in imitation of the Sunna of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him). See Al-Fituri, Atiyya Makhzum. *Dirasat fi tarikh Sharq Ifriqiya wa-janub al-Sahra'* [Studies in the History of East Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa]. Benghazi: Dar al-Kitab al-Watani, 1st ed., 1998, p. 303.

² Ibid., pp. 301–303. Ziyadeh, Nicola. *Ifriqiyyat: Dirasat fi tarikh al-Maghrib al-'Arabi wa-al-Sudan al-Gharbi* [African Studies: Studies in the History of the Arab Maghreb and the Western Sudan]. London: Riyad al-Rayyis li-al-Kutub wa-al-Nashid [publisher as given in the source], 1st ed., 1991, p. 318.

³ According to one account, Sunni Ali's daughters exclaimed "Askia," meaning "not he," when they heard of his accession. On hearing this, he ordered that he be called by that title alone, becoming Askia Muhammad. He is said to have been of Soninke origin, from the Nuri clan of Takrur, whose ancestors belonged to the Sanhaja and ruled the Sudan. See Al-Sa'di, Abd al-Rahman ibn Abd Allah ibn Imran ibn Amir (active in the eleventh/seventeenth century). *Tarikh al-Sudan* [History of the Sudan]. Paris: Paris School of Oriental Languages, edition unspecified, 1989, p. 72.

⁴ Al-Wazzan, al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Fasi (d. 957 AH/1550 CE). *Wasf Ifriqiya* [Description of Africa]. Translated by Muhammad Hajji and Muhammad al-Akhdar. Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 2nd ed., 1983, vol. 2, pp. 160–161. Al-Fituri, *Dirasat fi tarikh Sharq Ifriqiya wa-janub al-Sahra'*, p. 306.

⁵ Ibn Askar, *Dawhat al-nashir*, p. 130.

⁶ Al-Timbukti, *Nayl al-ibtihaj*, p. 577. Ibn Maryam, *Al-Bustan*, p. 255.

⁷ Al-Dali, al-Hadi al-Mabrouk. *Al-Tarikh al-hadari li-Ifriqiya fi-ma wara' al-Sahra' min nihayat al-qarn al-khamis 'ashar ila bidayat al-qarn al-thamin 'ashar* [The Cultural History of Sub-Saharan Africa from the Late Fifteenth to the Early Eighteenth Century]. Publisher and place unspecified, 2nd ed., 2001, p. 252.

⁸ Al-Maghili composed a poem responding to al-Suyuti's rejection of logic. Al-Suyuti replied in verse and expressed surprise at his position. For further details, see al-Timbukti, *Nayl al-ibtihaj*, pp. 578–579.

achieved this by securing the backing of the jurist Umar al-Bakkay, who succeeded his teacher al-Maghili as the order's leader in the region.¹

Al-Maghili's reforms in Songhay can be grouped into four broad areas. These are addressed across the seven questions in his work, as explained below.

1. Correcting Religious Belief and Confronting Indigenous Religious Practices:

Al-Maghili was a committed advocate of Islam and a devoted defender of the Sunna. He opposed those he regarded as enemies of the faith. He therefore sought to remove superstitions and customs that he considered alien to Islamic belief. Hubert Deschamps's general description of Africa south of the Sahara provides an approximate picture of the religious situation: "Their Islam most probably conceals traces, whether few or many, of their earlier paganism."² Al-Maghili accordingly insisted on religious renewal. Al-Hudayki writes: "Through him, God revived religion in Tuat and the Sudan."³ Ibn Askar confirms that his preaching reached the Sudan. He goes further, asserting that the king of Timbuktu embraced Islam through him.⁴ This claim requires reconsideration. Accepting it would imply that al-Maghili introduced Islam there, a view not supported by other biographies of either the jurist or the ruler. These accounts instead indicate that Askia Muhammad was already Muslim. His request for al-Maghili's legal guidance on the responsibilities of government provides clear evidence of this.

Al-Maghili's reform activity sought to establish the state on sound foundations. He urged rulers to follow Islamic principles in both word and deed. Among his recommendations was the avoidance of doubtful matters, especially questions of lawful and unlawful conduct. He explained: "If two courses appear equally valid to you, examine how your soul responds to them. Choose the one it finds more burdensome. In life and health, the soul tends to resist the truth. If it regards them equally, consider which you would prefer to die following. At the passage from this world to the next, the soul tends to accept only the truth."⁵ He also urged rulers to uphold the rules of Islamic government. They should prevent anyone from speaking about religion without knowledge, lest religion be corrupted. This responsibility rested with them.⁶

In discussing the legal status of property in their possession, he addressed inheritance. Some people did not distribute estates according to the Qur'an and the Sunna. Instead, the strong benefited at the expense of the weak. Islamic law, he explained, prescribed binding rules for inheritance. In his ruling, denying these provisions constituted unbelief. Those who acknowledged that they had sinned should be instructed in the relevant law. If they repented, the matter could be resolved. Otherwise, the ruler had to restore the rights of the vulnerable whose shares had been seized.⁷

His answers to the second and third questions reveal how little some Muslims in the region knew about their religion. Askia asked about Sunni Ali's people, who outwardly professed Islam and recited the two testimonies of faith. Yet they worshipped idols, offered sacrifices to them, venerated trees and stones, and practiced sorcery and divination.⁸ This helps explain Deschamps's account: "The African Muslim carefully observes the outward forms of prayer, including orientation, bowing, and prostration ... He observes the fast with great precision ... yet they do not abstain from smoking or intercourse with women."⁹ Al-Maghili's fatwa held that fighting such people took priority over fighting unbelievers whom Muslims did not follow. In his view, they mixed truth with falsehood and led ordinary Muslims astray, sometimes into unbelief without their awareness.¹⁰ The ruler's influence over his subjects was also decisive. Sunni Ali's Muslim subjects did not perform prayers or fast within his sight or hearing because they feared punishment.¹¹

Astrology attracted considerable interest throughout the Sudan, according to one Orientalist account.¹² Ibn Khaldun's wide-ranging discussion provides a particularly clear illustration. He offers examples from across the Islamic world, including the Sudan: "We have also heard of people in the land of the Sudan ... who bewitch clouds so that rain falls on a particular tract of land".¹³ Visitors and residents could observe the extent of these beliefs. Some practiced divination for a livelihood; others believed it could solve their worldly problems. Askia's questions and al-Maghili's answers describe its prevalence and the variety of its practitioners. One claimed to possess talismans that relieved distress.

¹ Al-Dali, *Al-Tarikh al-hadari*, pp. 252–253.

² Deschamps, Hubert. *Al-Diyanat fi Ifriqiya al-Sawda'* [Religions in Black Africa]. Translated by Ahmad Sadiq Hamdi; reviewed by Muhammad Abd Allah Draz; introduction by Mustafa Labib. Cairo: Egyptian General Book Organization, edition unspecified, 2011, p. 142.

³ Al-Hudayki, *Tabaqat al-Hudayki*, p. 246.

⁴ Ibn Askar, *Dawhat al-nashir*, p. 131.

⁵ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 33–34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

⁷ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 57–60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–36.

⁹ Deschamps, *Al-Diyanat fi Ifriqiya al-Sawda'*, p. 143.

¹⁰ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 43–46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹² Deschamps, *Al-Diyanat fi Ifriqiya al-Sawda'*, p. 143.

¹³ Ibn Khaldun, *Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad al-Hadrami* (d. 808 AH/1406 CE). *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldun* [Ibn Khaldun's Introduction]. Reviewed by Suhayl Zakkar. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, edition unspecified, 1431 AH/ 2001 CE [dates as given in the source], pp. 655–664.

Another professed knowledge of the unseen through geomancy, the stars, reports from jinn, or the sounds and movements of birds. Others wrote charms and amulets to attract wealth or love. Some even claimed that these practices rested on the Qur'an.¹

Islamic scriptural texts explicitly prohibited such practices. Ibn Khaldun connected his account to their scriptural condemnation: diviners received their information from devils or from their own souls that urged them toward evil.² The Qur'an states: "But the devils disbelieved, teaching people sorcery ... Yet they cannot harm anyone through it except by God's permission" (2:102).³

Al-Maghili was alarmed by what he encountered. His fatwa declared that known practitioners of sorcery and divination were liars and unbelievers, as were those who believed them and sought their services. He ruled that they should be required to repent under threat of execution. Those who repented should be spared. Those who refused should, in his ruling, be executed for unbelief and receive neither ritual washing nor shrouding nor burial in Muslim cemeteries.⁴

Deschamps's discussion of the blending of Islamic and indigenous beliefs⁵ helps clarify the efforts of al-Maghili and similar religious leaders. Their influence concerned the modification of existing customs as well as opposition to indigenous worship. Al-Hudayki states that al-Maghili "taught them religious principles and legal rulings in the Sudan."⁶ Comparing these accounts with later studies allows an assessment of his reform efforts. Many customs acquired an Islamic character. People came to worship and supplicate God instead of invoking other deities or relying on earlier beliefs for deliverance from hardship. Sorcery and divination largely disappeared, according to these studies. Earlier celebrations were replaced by Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Prophet's birthday, the Night of Decree, and Ashura. Celebrations of marriage, childbirth, and circumcision remained, but their indigenous religious features were removed.⁷ As Sudanese customs interacted with Islamic teachings, traditions with distinctive African forms emerged. Islam therefore did not seek to destroy all earlier values and customs. It sought to reform them and reject practices considered unacceptable.⁸

The limited sources on Africa south of the Sahara do not always provide a complete picture. Nevertheless, they reveal the role of this scholarly elite in reestablishing Islamic values. Accounts of widespread misconduct suggest a considerable distance between social practice and Islamic norms. Sunni Ali himself reportedly permitted what Islam prohibited as unlawful sexual relations. He took whichever women he desired, whether free or enslaved. He was even said to have taken both a mother and her daughter as partners.⁹

Islamic law explicitly prohibited such offenses. They were not confined to the Sudan, but occurred wherever human communities existed. Desire is part of human nature, as the Qur'an states: "The love of desires has been made attractive to people".¹⁰ Islam did not prohibit their lawful fulfillment. Rather, it prescribed legitimate means: "Among His signs is that He created spouses for you from among yourselves, so that you may find tranquility in them. He placed affection and mercy between you" (30:21). It also states: "Do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. It is an indecency and an evil way."¹¹ The first relationship is permitted and encouraged; the second is forbidden. Al-Maghili grounded his rulings in this distinction. His *Taj al-din* gives a fuller treatment: "Anyone found with a woman in an improper situation should be punished with painful flogging if the grounds for the prescribed penalty have not been established".¹² Although alcohol is not discussed in the work central to this study, it deserves mention as a wider social issue. In *Taj al-din*, he also writes: "If a person shows signs of drinking, whether in smell, speech, or gait, investigate the matter. If the smell of wine is established, he is treated as a drinker. If he is not otherwise suspected and the smell remains doubtful, discipline him according to the strength or weakness of the suspicion".¹³

As Arab reform influences deepened, changes became visible in customs and social relations. Marriage and family organization were among the areas affected. In place of fragmentation and moral disorder, marriage came to follow Islamic legal requirements. Islam also improved women's standing, offered them protection, provided for children's proper upbringing, and established an equitable system for distributing a deceased family member's estate.¹⁴ The

¹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 62.

² Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, pp. 126–127.

³ Qur'an, al-Baqara, verse 101 [the source gives 101; the quoted passage is numbered 102 in the main text].

⁴ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 62–64.

⁵ Deschamps, *Al-Diyanat fi Ifriqiya al-Sawda'*, p. 142.

⁶ Al-Hudayki, *Tabaqat al-Hudayki*, p. 246.

⁷ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 221–223.

⁸ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 210–213.

⁹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 37.

¹⁰ Qur'an, Al Imran, verse 14.

¹¹ Qur'an, al-Isra', verse 32.

¹² Al-Maghili, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim (d. 909 AH). *Taj al-din fi-ma yajibu 'ala al-muluk wa-al-salatin* [The Crown of Religion: The Duties of Kings and Sultans]. Edited by Muhammad Khayr Ramadan Yusuf. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1st ed., 1415 AH/ 1994 CE, p. 38.

¹³ Al-Maghili, *Taj al-din fi-ma yajibu 'ala al-muluk wa-al-salatin* [The Crown of Religion], pp. 37–38.

¹⁴ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 216–217.

prohibition of intoxicants contributed to psychological stability. It also encouraged people to avoid misconduct and pursue honorable occupations.¹

Donald Wiedner describes al-Maghili as mounting campaigns in the name of religious revival.² Reports from Timbuktu, Jenne, and surrounding areas referred to widespread practices he condemned, including unrestricted mixing between men and women and unmarried women leaving intimate parts of the body uncovered. The Qur'an instructs women: "Let them draw their coverings over their chests and not display their adornment".³ Al-Maghili regarded such practices as grave offenses. He expressed astonishment that they occurred in lands claiming to be Islamic, asserting that they were unheard of even among the People of the Book. Rulers, and any believers able to intervene, had a duty to address them. He proposed appointing trustworthy people to monitor neighborhoods by day and night, protect the population, and deter offenders.⁴ The muhtasib, the official responsible for public conduct and market supervision, therefore had an important regulatory role. Al-Mawardi similarly addressed improper mixing and seclusion: "If she is a close relative whom you cannot marry, protect her from situations that invite suspicion. If she is unrelated to you, fear God regarding seclusion that may lead you to disobey Him".⁵

Historical accounts support the view that al-Maghili's efforts had an impact. Local populations adopted Muslim forms of dress. Whereas some had previously taken pride in nakedness, they came to observe purification and bodily covering in connection with prayer and fasting. They also took pride in their clean white garments before peers who retained indigenous religious practices.⁶

Sufi orders also helped establish ethical values in the region. They contributed to the spread of Islam by building mosques and schools, marrying into local African communities, and purchasing and freeing enslaved people. They taught the principles and culture of Islam to facilitate their understanding.⁷ The Qadiriyya, founded in Iraq by Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani in the sixth/twelfth century, gained particular influence in Songhay. Its teachers invited tribes practicing indigenous religions to embrace Islam and taught them Arabic communication.⁸ Al-Maghili's preaching contributed to this process. Kunta migrants spread the order, notably his student and follower Shaykh Umar ibn Ahmad al-Bakkay (1480–1553 CE), who learned the principles of scholarship and Islam from him. The source places this later expansion in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In our view, a central factor in the success of Islamic preaching and subsequent reform was peaceful instruction and sound guidance. These teachers followed the Qur'anic injunction: "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel."⁹ Their conduct made them examples to others. Local people recognized their good intentions and received their teaching favorably.

2. The Role of Religious Conscience in Reforming Islamic Government:

Government was among al-Maghili's principal concerns. He directed much of his attention toward rulers, seeking to instruct them in Islamic law and shape their conduct accordingly.¹⁰ In the first question, he explained the weight of the trust assumed by Askia as ruler¹¹ and described the qualities required of a Muslim sovereign: "You are only a servant who owns nothing. Your Master has raised you above many of His servants so that you may set right their religious and worldly affairs, not become their lord and master. Throughout your kingdom, you are a shepherd, not an owner. Every

¹ Ibid., pp. 210–211.

² Wiedner, Donald. *Tarikh Ifriqiya janub al-Sahra'* [A History of Sub-Saharan Africa]. Translated by Rashid al-Barawi. Al-Faggala: Dar al-Jil li-al-Tiba'a, edition and date unspecified, p. 49.

³ Qur'an, al-Nur, verse 31.

⁴ Al-Maghili, As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili, pp. 63–69.

⁵ Al-Mawardi, Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Habib (d. 450 AH). *Al-Ahkam al-sultaniyya wa-al-wilayat al-diniyya* [The Ordinances of Government and Religious Offices]. Edited by Ahmad Mubarak al-Baghdadi. Kuwait: Maktabat Dar Ibn Qutayba, 1st ed., 1409 AH/1989 CE, pp. 326–327.

⁶ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 210–211.

⁷ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 179–180.

⁸ Marty, Paul. *Al-Qaba'il al-Baydaniyya fi al-Hawd wa-al-Sahil al-Muritani wa-qissat al-ihtilal al-Faransi li-al-mintaqa* [The Bidan Tribes of the Hodh and the Mauritanian Sahel and the History of the French Occupation of the Region]. Arabic translation by Muhammad Mahmud Waddadi. Benghazi: Dar al-Kitab al-Wataniyya, 1st ed., 2001, p. 151. Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, p. 181.

⁹ Qur'an, al-Nahl, verse 125.

¹⁰ Bazina, Abd Allah Salim. *Intishar al-Islam fi Ifriqiya janub al-Sahra'* [The Spread of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa]. Benghazi: Dar al-Kutub al-Wataniyya, 1st ed., 2010, pp. 189–191.

¹¹ He supports his answer with the Prophet's prayer: "O God, whoever assumes responsibility for any of my community's affairs and makes matters difficult for them, make matters difficult for him. Whoever assumes responsibility for any of their affairs and treats them gently, treat him gently." See Abu al-Husayn Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri al-Naysaburi (d. 261 AH/875 CE). *Sahih Muslim* [Muslim's Authentic Hadith Collection]. Prepared by Abu Suhayb al-Karmi. Riyadh: Bayt al-Afkar al-Dawliyya li-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi', edition unspecified, 1419 AH/1998 CE, Book of Government, chapter on the merit of a just ruler, punishment of an unjust ruler, kindness to subjects, and the prohibition of burdening them, hadith no. 1828, p. 763.

shepherd is accountable for his flock.”¹ The ruler should associate with the virtuous and avoid the corrupt.² Al-Maghili supported this advice with verses beginning:³

When a ruler draws the wicked close and turns away from the virtuous, he is corrupt.

When a ruler draws the virtuous close and turns away from the wicked, he is righteous.

A person's companion reveals his character; this is plain to all.⁴

To govern according to divine revelation,⁵ the ruler should consult knowledgeable people on matters he does not understand. The Qur'an states in both al-Nahl and al-Anbiya: "Ask those who possess knowledge if you do not know."⁶ The rulers of Songhay and Jenne were known for honoring jurists and scholars and following their guidance.⁷ Al-Sa'di writes of Askia Muhammad: "He associated with scholars and sought their legal opinions on the affairs of government that required his attention".⁸ Askia's commitment to Islamic principles is also evident in his decision to suspend reliance on doubtful fatwas. He remarked: "Some jurists in our country have confused me, so I have ceased to rely on them".⁹

Conversely, Ibn Abd al-Barr records a scholar's observation: "The worst rulers are those most distant from scholars, and the worst scholars are those closest to rulers."¹⁰ Sunni Ali had surrounded himself with jurists who provided cover for his conduct. The account states: "He has jurists whom he appointed for this purpose. Whenever he wishes to pursue one of his aims, he summons them and asks: 'Is this not lawful?' They answer: 'Yes, it is permitted to you.' They agree with his wishes in these matters, and he uses them to shield himself from accusations of oppression and injustice".¹¹

Al-Maghili repeatedly urged the ruler to govern justly.¹² This followed the Qur'anic command: "God commands justice and good conduct".¹³ He invoked the prophetic teaching that a ruler would appear in chains on the Day of Resurrection. Justice would release him, while oppression would destroy him.¹⁴ The Qur'an also commands: "When you judge between people, judge with justice."¹⁵ Justice is therefore both a legal obligation and a foundational norm of Muslim society. Ibn Khaldun includes it among the four principal qualifications for the caliphate.¹⁶

Askia's career indicates that he followed his legal adviser's guidance and sought his subjects' support.¹⁷ His actions were well received. The author of al-Sa'ada al-abadiyya writes: "In his days there was neither misery nor distress. His subjects lived in safety and well-being".¹⁸ Al-Hasan al-Wazzan, an eyewitness to the region, offers a similarly striking description: "He freed all the Black peoples from the domination of the chiefs of the Libyan tribes".¹⁹ Askia's administrative measures can thus be understood as consistent with the spirit of Islam, which had become the population's faith. His reign was marked by stability and security.²⁰

The work also reveals al-Maghili's firmness and commitment to speaking the truth. He insisted on removing practices he considered contrary to Islam. He instructed the ruler: "Do not say of a wrong that you can remove today: 'It

¹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 22–25.

² Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 23.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵ This is stated in several verses of al-Ma'ida: "Those who do not judge by what God has revealed are the unbelievers" (5:44); "Those who do not judge by what God has revealed are the wrongdoers" (5:45); and "Those who do not judge by what God has revealed are the defiantly disobedient" (5:47). Qur'an, al-Ma'ida, verses 44, 45, and 47.

⁶ Qur'an, al-Nahl, verse 43; al-Anbiya', verse 7.

⁷ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, p. 176.

⁸ Al-Sa'di, *Tarikh al-Sudan*, p. 72.

⁹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 59.

¹⁰ Ibn Abd al-Barr, Abu Umar Yusuf (d. 463 AH). *Jami' bayan al-'ilm wa-fadlihi* [A Comprehensive Account of Knowledge and Its Merit]. Edited by Abu al-Ashbal al-Zuhayri. Saudi Arabia: Dar Ibn al-Jawzi, 1st ed., 1414 AH/1994 CE, vol. 1, p. 644.

¹¹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 48–49.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 55.

¹³ Qur'an, al-Nahl, verse 90.

¹⁴ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Qur'an, al-Nisa', verse 58.

¹⁶ He writes: "The conditions of this office are four: knowledge, justice, competence, and sound senses and limbs insofar as they affect judgment and action. A fifth condition, Qurayshi descent, is disputed." See Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, p. 241.

¹⁷ Zabadia, Abd al-Qadir. *Mamlakat Sanghay fi 'ahd al-Askiyyin (1493–1591)* [The Kingdom of Songhay under the Askias (1493–1591)]. Algiers: al-Sharika al-Wataniyya, edition and date unspecified, p. 33.

¹⁸ Al-Arawani, Ahmad Babir. *Al-Sa'ada al-abadiyya fi al-ta'rif bi-'ulama' Tinbukt al-bahiyya* [Eternal Felicity: Introducing the Scholars of Splendid Timbuktu]. Study and critical edition by al-Hadi al-Mabrouk al-Dali; introduction by Abd al-Hamid Abd Allah al-Harama. Benghazi: Dar al-Kutub al-Wataniyya, 1st ed., 2001, p. 66.

¹⁹ Al-Wazzan, Wasf Ifriqiya, p. 160.

²⁰ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 83–84.

is not my responsibility. I did not commit it; someone else did.' Whatever another person has done and then passed into your hands, preserve it if it is good and remove it if it is evil, however long it has existed. Sovereignty belongs to God, and judgment belongs to God. You are God's servant, and you must set right everything entrusted to you".¹

Specialist studies suggest that the strong opposition to Askia's emancipatory reforms from Songhay's notables and centers of indigenous religious authority reflected their impact. This opposition led him to use force.² Most of his subjects subsequently embraced Islam across several kingdoms brought under his influence,³ including Mali, Jini (identified in the source as present-day Guinea), and Gobir.⁴ He annexed provinces from Mali and defeated non-Muslim Fulani groups in Futa Toro. He then moved east toward Agadez, in present-day Niger, subdued rebellious tribes in Dendi north of Dahomey, and extended his influence over kingdoms in northern Nigeria. His realm stretched from the Niger desert and Air in the east to the Senegal basin in the west, and from Segu on the Niger in the south to the Algerian Sahara in the north.⁵

The contrast with conditions under the Sunni dynasty also indicates the change attributed to Askia. Sunni Ali reportedly sanctioned the killing of Muslims, including Qur'an readers, jurists, women, and children. The second question describes plunder, the capture of women, and the sale of free people. Al-Maghili's ruling identified the perpetrators as oppressive wrongdoers and described fighting them as among the most important and meritorious forms of jihad.⁶

Accounts of the Askia rulers, by contrast, emphasize their concern for justice and security, adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunna, and implementation of Islamic law. One source states of Askia: "He renewed religion and appointed judges and imams. May God reward him for his service to Islam".⁷ The ruler's integrity was reflected in his officials and governors, who helped restore order. Maliki judges played a particular role. They supervised the property of orphans and strangers,⁸ which Sunni Ali and his oppressive agents had previously seized by force.⁹

The fourth question addresses related issues. It asks about supporting those who seek reform, protecting Muslims from corruption, and fighting oppressive rulers who claim to uphold justice and divine law.¹⁰ It also concerns warfare against neighboring non-Muslims¹¹ and Muslims in adjoining territories who wish to submit to Askia's authority.¹² The adoption of jihad by rulers, subjects, scholars, and ordinary people is presented here as an expression of their Islamic commitments. Al-Maghili's detailed response distinguishes three situations: "Know that there are three kinds of lands. First are lands without a ruler, whose people are left without government. Invite them to pledge allegiance and submit to your authority. If they refuse, compel them as far as you can, for a community of Muslims may not remain without government ... Confront them openly with the sword until they all submit to your authority in obedience to God and His Messenger. This is among the most meritorious and important forms of jihad. Second are lands with a ruler who attends to their religious and worldly interests as far as circumstances permit. None of them may withdraw obedience from him, and no one may challenge his authority over his subjects ... Third are lands ruled by one of the rulers you described, who levy unlawful taxes through oppression and corruption and neglect reform. If you can remove his oppression from Muslim lands without harming their people, and establish a just ruler, do so".¹³

Al-Maghili also addressed people who professed Islam but remained among hostile groups. They claimed weakness and an inability to defend themselves. His ruling was that the hostile groups should still be attacked, even with Muslims among them. He held that these Muslims had wronged themselves by residing there. Those who lived there voluntarily and assisted wrongdoing were, in his ruling, subject to the same treatment as the hostile group, including killing and seizure of property.¹⁴

¹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 45.

² Zabadia, *Mamlakat Sanghay*, p. 33.

³ Wiedner, *Tarikh Ifriqiya janub al-Sahra'*, p. 49.

⁴ Al-Wazzan, *Wasf Ifriqiya*, pp. 164–165, 171.

⁵ Qaddah, Na'im. *Ifriqiya al-Gharbiyya fi zill al-Islam* [West Africa under Islam]. Reviewed by Umar al-Hakim. Publisher, publication date, edition, and printing date unspecified, p. 70.

⁶ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 37.

⁷ Al-Timbukti, Mahmud Ka'ti. *Al-Mukhtar min Tarikh al-fattash fi akhbar al-buldan wa-al-juyush wa-akabir al-nas* [Selections from the Chronicle of the Inquirer into the History of Lands, Armies, and Notable People]. Introduction, study, and annotations by Abd al-Na'im Dayfi Uthman. Cairo: Dar al-'Ulum, 1st ed., 2005, p. 69.

⁸ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 89–91.

⁹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–49.

¹¹ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, p. 95.

¹² The Messenger of God (peace be upon him) said: "If allegiance is pledged to two caliphs, kill the latter of the two." See Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Book of Government, chapter on allegiance being pledged to two caliphs, hadith no. 1853, p. 774.

¹³ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 49–51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 59–61.

On supporting influential figures who sought to establish justice and remove oppression, he followed the Qur'anic principles: "Believing men and women are allies of one another. They command right and forbid wrong";¹ and "Let there be among you a community calling to goodness, commanding right and forbidding wrong. They are the successful."² He advised the ruler: "Examine the condition of the person requesting your assistance. If you trust his claim and believe that he will fulfill his promise and covenant once strengthened, support him in what benefits Muslims. If you do not trust his claim, do not help him. Attend to your own proper responsibilities and leave the wrongdoers alone. God may punish one wrongdoer through another, then punish them both."³ His advice also called for caution. One wrong should not be replaced by another of equal or greater gravity. The lesser of two harms should be chosen, which he described as an established principle and an inherited practice.⁴ These details clarify the rules of jihad, which are not always understood, even by those responsible for applying them. Failure to observe them helps explain conflicts between Islamic states under differing circumstances and motives.

Al-Maghili's teaching, like that of other scholars, therefore found a receptive environment. Local people welcomed it. Royal engagement with religious guidance also bore fruit through the adoption of reform policies during Askia's reign and afterward.

3. The Status of Scholars and the Intellectual Revival of Songhay

Al-Maghili was an imam and preacher known for intelligence and understanding. He traveled through parts of the Sudan to consolidate religion and spread learning. Cultural life was a central concern. He stressed the importance of knowledge and respect for scholars, whose standing the Qur'an repeatedly affirms: "God will raise those of you who believe and those granted knowledge by degrees"; and "Say: Are those who know equal to those who do not know?"⁵ Askia followed this principle throughout his reign. Ibn Askar describes him as a king who "showed the highest regard for learning and scholars".⁶ Scholars were regarded as crucial to the moral condition of society.

The exchange between Askia and al-Maghili also reveals the limited knowledge of some members of the learned class. This called into question their qualifications for major public offices. The problem was especially serious because they regarded themselves as scholars and heirs to the prophets, with books to which they claimed to refer. Al-Maghili explained how to distinguish sound scholars from corrupt ones. Both groups recited the Qur'an and read hadith, but these activities alone were insufficient. He divided learned readers into three categories. The first combined knowledge and piety. Such people belonged to the "people of knowledge" and were qualified to guide Muslims in religious and worldly affairs. The second lacked one of these qualities. They did not qualify and should not be followed in religious matters. The third consisted of those whose status remained uncertain. Judgment should be suspended until both qualities were established.⁷ Ibn Abd al-Barr expresses a similar distinction: "No scholar is free from error. Whoever errs rarely and is correct often is a scholar. Whoever is correct rarely and errs often is ignorant".⁸

Al-Maghili insisted that scholars were the successors of the prophets. They should be trusted and sought out, however distant they might be.⁹ Conversely, he described corrupt scholars as "thieves of religion." He not only prohibited following them but called for struggle against them.¹⁰ He considered their danger to the community greater than that of the Antichrist.¹¹ This judgment rested on their conduct. As noted above, they approved practices unsupported by religion, apparently from fear of the ruler or a desire to gain his favor. In his view, their offense could exceed the ruler's own. The issue was not merely their association with power, but their manipulation and careless issuance of fatwas.¹² A hadith states: "If someone receives a fatwa issued without knowledge, the sin rests on the person who issued it".¹³ Scholars were therefore central to building a sound society that preserved its values.

The emergence of cultural centers suggests the success of al-Maghili and other distinguished scholars. Timbuktu regained its scholarly standing under the Askia rulers, who welcomed jurists. Scholars arrived from Walata and elsewhere. By the tenth/sixteenth century, Timbuktu ranked alongside major intellectual centers in the Islamic East and West. Its renown was such that the ruler became associated with it and was called Askia Abu Bakr, King of Timbuktu.¹⁴ Umar ibn

¹ Qur'an, al-Tawba, verse 71.

² Qur'an, Al Imran, verse 104.

³ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 49–51.

⁵ Qur'an, al-Zumar, verse 9; al-Mujadila, verse 11.

⁶ Ibn Askar, *Dawhat al-nashir*, p. 131.

⁷ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 22–32.

⁸ Ibn Abd al-Barr, *Jami' bayan al-'ilm wa-fadlihi*, vol. 2, p. 821.

⁹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49, 52.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹³ Abu Dawud, Sulayman ibn al-Ash'ath al-Sijistani al-Azdi (d. 275 AH/889 CE). *Sunan Abi Dawud* [The Sunan of Abu Dawud]. Prepared and annotated by Izzat Ubayd al-Da'as and Adil al-Sayyid. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1st ed., 1418 AH/1997 CE, vol. 4, Book of Knowledge, chapter on caution in issuing fatwas, hadith no. 3657, pp. 44–45.

¹⁴ Al-Wazzan, *Wasf Ifriqiya*, p. 160.

Muhammad Aqit was among its prominent scholars. Jenne likewise became an Islamic city with a cultural standing comparable to Timbuktu. It maintained close connections with intellectual centers in North Africa.¹

Historians of the Sudan describe scholars from Timbuktu traveling to and settling in territories under Songhay's influence, including Gao, Jenne, and Timbuktu itself. They taught religious knowledge and spread Islamic culture. By securing scholarly support, Askia Muhammad helped establish peace and security across his vast kingdom.² This also had political consequences: Songhay reached its greatest territorial extent during his reign.

Askia's description of local scholars as non-Arabic speakers with only limited knowledge of Arabic indicates the language's initially restricted reach.³ Arabic later became the country's official language, according to the studies cited.⁴ Deschamps's account of the Arab-Islamic character acquired by Africa south of the Sahara, particularly the Sudan,⁵ suggests the lasting influence of these teachers. Arabic spread even among sections of the wider population. Across substantial areas, it served worship, learning, trade, and everyday communication.⁶ This did not entail abandoning the Songhay language.⁷

The achievements of Sudanese authors writing in formal Arabic illustrate this development. Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti wrote across the disciplines familiar in his age. He supplemented Ibn Farhun's al-Dibaj al-mudhahhab with Nayl al-ibtihaj bi-tatriz al-Dibaj, which offers a valuable picture of intellectual life in the Western Sudan. Al-Sa'di, who lived in Timbuktu and Jenne, wrote the well-known Tarikh al-Sudan, an important source on Songhay. The jurist Mahmud Ka'ti al-Timbukti accompanied Askia Muhammad on his travels and recorded information about the region in a work called al-Fattash fi akhbar al-Sudan.⁸ A learned class thus developed within a relatively short period.

Imams and teachers performed many functions in Western Sudanese communities. In addition to preaching and leading prayers, they taught religious principles and instructed children in the Qur'an. They supervised weddings, funerals, celebrations of a child's birth, and circumcisions. They also collected zakat and charitable donations. Their knowledge of Islamic law earned them respect among rulers and ordinary people alike. Even adherents of indigenous religions sought their blessings and entrusted them with their children's education. Sudanese rulers consequently gave substantial encouragement to cultural and intellectual life.⁹ Historical sources place al-Maghili among those who made an important contribution to this intellectual revival. His career combined struggle against those he regarded as enemies of religion with efforts to correct practices he considered contrary to Islam.

4. The Islamic Legal Foundations of Economic Reform in al-Maghili's Thought:

Al-Maghili's reform policy also addressed economic life, the basis of people's livelihoods. Islam emphasized lawful means of acquiring wealth. The fourth question describes Sunni Ali and some of his agents imposing maks, or unlawful levies,¹⁰ and seizing property through plunder and the appropriation of orphans' wealth. When told that his actions were unlawful, he claimed superior knowledge. He maintained that the goods taken from caravans entering his territory were merely zakat. To legitimize his conduct, he appointed jurists willing to endorse his wishes.¹¹ This contributed to the oppression and hardship of working people. A report attributed to the Prophet states: "Two groups in my community determine its condition. If they are upright, the community is upright; if they are corrupt, the community is corrupt: rulers and scholars."¹² Its economic relevance lies in the position of the ruler and his scholarly entourage as an aristocratic class. In the authors' assessment, they were responsible for the country's economic impoverishment.

Al-Maghili's response reflected his religious commitment. Wrongdoing had to be stopped, even through force.¹³ In Taj al-din, he writes: "Maks is also a form of oppression. It is prohibited by consensus. Against those who claim it is lawful, the report states: 'An unlawful tax collector will not enter Paradise.'"¹⁴ He also writes: "Unlawful tax collectors

¹ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 186–188.

² Wiedner, *Tarikh Ifriqiya janub al-Sahra*, p. 49. Abd al-Halim, Rajab Muhammad. *Tarikh al-Muslimin fi Ifriqiya (janubi al-Sahra)* [History of Muslims in Sub-Saharan Africa]. Cairo: Safir li-al-Tab' wa-al-Nashr, edition and date unspecified, pp. 38–39. Qaddah, *Ifriqiya al-Gharbiyya fi zill al-Islam*, pp. 71, 73.

³ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 22.

⁴ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, p. 191.

⁵ Deschamps, *Al-Diyanat fi Ifriqiya al-Sawda*, p. 153.

⁶ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, p. 191.

⁷ Zabadia, *Mamlakat Sanghay*, p. 102.

⁸ Abd al-Halim, *Tarikh al-Muslimin fi Ifriqiya*, pp. 61–62.

⁹ Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta'thir al-'Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 174–175.

¹⁰ Maks derives from the verb makasa, meaning to levy dues. It refers to money collected from sellers in pre-Islamic markets. The maks was a collector of a tenth: a levy or tithe was taken from anyone who sold goods. See Ibn Manzur, Abu al-Fadl Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn Mukarram al-Ifriqi al-Misri. *Lisan al-'Arab* [The Arabic Tongue]. Beirut: Dar Sadir, edition and date unspecified, vol. 6, pp. 220–221.

¹¹ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 47–49.

¹² Ibn Abd al-Barr, *Jami' bayan al-'ilm wa-fadlihi*, vol. 1, p. 641.

¹³ Al-Maghili, *As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 44–51.

¹⁴ Al-Maghili, *Taj al-din*, p. 51.

are brothers to dogs. Even the raven curses them. Nothing fills the eye of the son of Adam but dust.”¹ Ibn Khaldun’s observation that luxury, ease, and new levies herald a dynasty’s decline² appears applicable to Sunni Ali and his entourage.

On land tax and zakat on crops and livestock, al-Maghili advised appointing officials to collect and distribute the dues. Zakat should preferably be distributed among the people of the place where it was collected. An exception could be made when others had a more pressing need. People were obliged to pay zakat to a just imam. Refusal could be met with compulsory collection, even armed enforcement if necessary. If the person died, the payment should be taken from the estate. Persistent refusal warranted whatever deterrent penalty the imam deemed appropriate, including corporal punishment or imprisonment.³

Taj al-din provides further detail. Al-Maghili divided the wealth God provided for His servants into zakat and fay’. Zakat included dues on monetary wealth, crops, livestock, and minerals, as well as zakat al-fitr. With the exception of zakat al-fitr, it was allocated to the eight categories named in the Qur’an: “Alms are only for the poor, the needy, those employed to administer them, those whose hearts are to be reconciled, the freeing of those in bondage, those in debt, the cause of God, and the traveler. This is an obligation from God. God is all-knowing and wise.”⁴ Zakat al-fitr was reserved for the first two categories: the poor and the needy.

Fay’⁵ included the one-fifth share of buried treasure,⁶ mineral revenues, one-fifth of war booty, payments from protected non-Muslim communities and treaty populations, dues from their merchants, land tax, estates without heirs, property obtained from enemy populations without fighting, and mixed funds whose owners could not be identified.⁷ Distribution should begin with the resources and equipment needed by the state. The ruler should then pay those serving Muslim public interests, including scholars and judges. Next came the poor, beginning with those in greatest need, followed by equal distribution among the population.⁸ Al-Maghili also addressed commercial fraud. This included manipulating weights and measures, adulterating gold or silver with copper, inflating meat, and adding water to milk. Such practices, he stated, were prohibited by the Qur’an, the Sunna, and consensus. The ruler should appoint a market supervisor to regulate weights and measures and combat fraud.⁹ The muhtasib’s role in preventing market deception was therefore essential, as al-Mawardi and Ibn Khaldun also recognized.¹⁰

The sale of enslaved women, in al-Maghili’s account of the historical law, required *muwada’a for istibra’*: placing a woman with a trustworthy person until menstruation, for example, established whether she was pregnant.¹¹ He also addressed the forced sale of free people and the capture of women under Sunni Ali.¹² Askia sought a ruling on enslaved persons and property taken in conflicts involving Muslims. Al-Maghili distinguished those he classified as originally non-Muslim from those he classified as apostates. Under his ruling, the women and children of the former could be taken captive and their property divided. The women and children of the latter were not to be enslaved, but were to be compelled to return to Islam. Their property was to become Muslim fay’.¹³ Askia consequently released those who claimed to be free and returned seized property to its owners.¹⁴ The studies cited maintain that this form of trade gradually declined as Arab-Islamic influences deepened and scholars and jurists condemned it.¹⁵

Regarding land conquered by force, the fatwa held that Muslims could not prevent other Muslims from using it. It invoked the hadith: “Muslims share three things: pasture, water, and fire”.¹⁶ A related dispute concerned land whose inhabitants had been driven away by an enemy. Its owners demanded rent, while those cultivating it regarded it as

¹ Ibid., p. 52.

² Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, pp. 345–346.

³ Al-Maghili, *As’ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 53–57.

⁴ Qur’an, al-Tawba, verse 60.

⁵ Fay’ is property received from polytheists without fighting, including payments under truces, land tax, jizya, and tenths levied on their trade. See al-Mawardi, *Al-Ahkam al-sultaniyya*, p. 161.

⁶ The term is described as a plural of rikza, rakiza, or rikaza. It denotes pieces of silver or gold extracted from the earth or a mineral deposit. Its meaning is disputed. Some interpret it as treasure buried in pre-Islamic times; others as naturally occurring minerals or native gold. It is so named because it is embedded in the earth. See Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, vol. 5, p. 356.

⁷ For details on fay’ and its distribution, see al-Mawardi, *Al-Ahkam al-sultaniyya*, pp. 161–166.

⁸ Al-Maghili, *Taj al-din*, pp. 55–58. Al-Maghili, *As’ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, p. 45.

⁹ Al-Maghili, *As’ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 62–66.

¹⁰ Al-Mawardi, *Al-Ahkam al-sultaniyya*, p. 316. Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, pp. 280–281.

¹¹ *Istibra’* means establishing the absence of pregnancy. Under the historical rule described, a man who purchased or captured an enslaved woman was not to have intercourse with her until she had menstruated and become ritually pure, so that her pregnancy status could be established. See Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, vol. 1, p. 33.

¹² For details on captivity, see al-Mawardi, *Al-Ahkam al-sultaniyya*, pp. 171–174.

¹³ Al-Maghili, *As’ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili*, pp. 37–41.

¹⁴ Al-Timbukti, Mahmud Ka’ti, *Al-Mukhtar min Tarikh al-fattash*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Amtir Sa’d Ghayth Ahmad, *Al-Ta’thir al-‘Arabi al-Islami*, pp. 144–145.

¹⁶ Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, vol. 3, Book of Sales and Leases, chapter on withholding water, hadith no. 3477, p. 484.

abandoned land. Al-Maghili answered that the owners should either use it themselves or leave it to those who would. They had no right to charge for its use.¹ The ruling followed the prophetic instruction: "Whoever has no need of his land should grant its use to his brother or leave it".² Askia Muhammad's economic measures, which generated substantial returns, thus indicate the influence of al-Maghili's reform program.

Conclusion:

Comparing earlier conditions in Songhay with those following al-Maghili's reforms suggests that efforts to consolidate Islam bore considerable fruit. Islam became the state's official religion. Arabic, closely associated with the faith, also acquired official status and came to serve everyday communication. These changes strengthened the position of Muslims and Islam. Government was placed on firmer foundations, contributing to significant developments across the region's social and institutional life.

Al-Maghili's writings enriched scholarly life in the Sudan and Songhay. The high standing he accorded scholars also contributed to cultural development. The Sudan, including Songhay, became a destination for scholars and jurists.

Al-Maghili was known for speaking the truth without fear of criticism. His teaching was welcomed by Songhay's people and rulers, who recognized in it the benevolent principles of Islam. His fatwas became models for contemporary conduct and points of reference for later generations. Recognition is also due to Askia. Troubled by conditions in his kingdom, he personally oversaw its affairs and acted as a vigilant guardian of his subjects.

Arab-Islamic influence helped the Western Sudan develop regular armies that supported the unity of Mali and Songhay. It also strengthened their economic capacity and standing among Sudanese, and perhaps wider African, kingdoms. The authors further conclude that class distinctions disappeared as Islam affirmed equality among Muslims, allowing no distinction between a Black African and an Arab except in piety. They also argue that social disorders and vices disappeared from Songhay society and were replaced by Arab-Islamic traditions. Al-Maghili's sustained teaching and Askia's determination thus combined to establish Songhay among the major Islamic kingdoms.

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¹ Al-Maghili, As'ilat al-Askia wa-ajwibat al-Maghili, pp. 58–61.

² Abu Dawud, Sunan Abi Dawud, vol. 3, Book of Sales and Leases, chapter on the strict prohibition of this practice, hadith no. 3398, p. 445.

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Translator's Notes for Author Review

These notes are separate from the translated article. The source's arguments, quotations, reference order, and page citations have been retained. English renderings of Arabic book titles identify the cited Arabic works; they do not indicate consultation of published English editions. Qur'anic and hadith quotations are translated from the wording supplied in the article.

The source includes both an Arabic abstract and an English abstract. Both sections have been retained in English, with aligned wording. A journal submission will normally require a single English abstract.

Several source details require author verification before submission: the AH label attached to Sunni Ali's 1466–1492 reign; the date pairs 899 AH/1493 CE and 930 AH/1528 CE; the stated recovery of Timbuktu in 869 AH/1465 CE; and the identification of Jini as present-day Guinea. The translation preserves these details without attempting a historical correction.

The bibliography gives 1431 AH/2001 CE for Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddima and 1937 for Amtir Sa'd Ghayth Ahmad's study. The former date pair is inconsistent; both entries should be checked against the editions used. The publisher wording in Nicola Ziyadeh's entry also requires confirmation. The al-Baqara footnote gives verse 101, while the quotation in the body is marked 102. This discrepancy is explicitly retained in the translated note.

Please confirm the authors' preferred Latin-script names and official institutional affiliations. The text's broad historical conclusions and the authenticity or interpretation of cited reports remain the authors' scholarly responsibility; translation does not independently verify them.