

*Moraes Farias, Paulo F. de: Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuāreg History.* Oxford University Press (Fontes Historiae Africanae), Oxford 2003. CCXLVI, 280 pp., 69 plates. Price UK L 99,-, US \$ 185,-. ISBN 0-19-726222-8.

The history of the Middle Niger is one of the most fascinating topics in the study of the medieval African past. The availability of various written sources for this region makes it possible to reconstruct a history going beyond the enumeration of successive rulers and the account of territorial expansion. At the centre of these developments there was the powerful state of Kawkaw named after its capital Gao (Tuareg: Gawgaw) situated at the eastern arc of the Niger bend. In the second half of the fifteenth century this state became the basis of the extensive Songhay Empire. The two chronicles of Timbuktu concentrate on the Songhay Empire and only cursorily refer to the preceding period. They tell us the story of two successive but related dynasties, first the Zā and then the Sonni. The Zā are said to have originated from Kukiya, a locality downstream from Gao, while the Sonni are depicted as opponents of the Malian domination in the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century without any particular power base. Arab authors from abroad complement and sometimes contradict this information. Although the chroniclers of Timbuktu could only rely on legends and meagre king lists to describe the early period of Gao history, modern scholars still use their accounts as basic guides for the reconstruction of the history of the Middle Niger.

Paulo Farias approaches the subject more critically by looking at the narrative sources from the perspective of contemporary inscriptions found at the eastern arc of the Niger bend. His voluminous and well-produced book presents, first and foremost, the texts of all significant Arabic inscriptions from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries mainly found at four different sites: the royal town of Old Gao, the trading town of Gao-Saney, Essuk – the ruins of the trading town of Tadmekka – and at Kukiya-Bentia. It thus brings together in one volume the Arabic transcriptions, English translations, photographs (where available), in many cases also the line-drawings as well as extensive commentaries of 250 inscriptions. Maps of the different sites indicate the precise spot where a discovery was made. In a lengthy introduction – which is a book in itself – the author considers the gener-

al setting of the inscriptions: their place in Islamic epigraphy, their relation to the Timbuktu chronicles, their own historical framework, their characteristic epigraphic features and, more specifically, their historical significance.

From this textual basis Farias examines many important aspects of the medieval history of the Middle Niger by subjecting the Timbuktu chronicles to radical criticism. Working chronologically, he first focuses on the royal inscriptions of Gao-Saney from the beginning of the twelfth century. The earliest ones are marble. Farias agrees with Sauvaget's suggestion that they were produced in the Andalusian city of Almeria.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he comes to the conclusion that the kings mentioned in these inscriptions, the Zuwa or Zāghē, were a dynasty in their own right, different from the one of king Qandā, an individual ruler referred to by al-Bakrī in the second half of the eleventh century. Also, he cogently compares the prominent position occupied by the queens mentioned in six inscriptions with the high status enjoyed by the "official queen" in Borgu. He could have added the better known examples of the Hausa female officeholders of Magajiya and Inna who were formerly so powerful that under certain circumstances they could even dismiss the king. Nevertheless, a different case can be made for the idea that new-comers got married to the daughters of former kings belonging to a local dynasty.

With respect to the rise of the Sonni, Farias rejects the historicity of Ali Kolon, the supposed liberator of Songhay from Malian domination, by pointing out that Tuareg oral traditions of Hoggar and Azawagh depict the same figure as a wise giant. He is therefore probably right in thinking that the Timbuktu chroniclers relied on a common basis of Tuareg-Songhay legends in order to present the rise of the Sonni as a heroic feature of Songhay resistance against Malian foreign rule. Furthermore he calls attention to the considerable corpus of inscriptions found in Kukiya-Bentia. More precisely, he deduces from the tombstones of a *khaṭīb* (preacher of the Friday sermon) and of a *wazīr* (minister) who died in 1412 and 1421 respectively that the Sonni of Kukiya had set up a rudimentary of an Islamic communal organisation. This corrects the previously held view of a much earlier origin of the Zā from Kukiya and the tendency to associate the Sonni with a strong inclination towards paganism.

Farias' treatment of the Zuwa kings of Gao-Saney is less convincing. He recognizes a dynastic change in Gao in connection with the Ghana-Almoravid expedition against Tadmekka in 1083 AD, indicat-

ing that some inscriptions bear witness to the earlier dynasty alluded to by al-Bakrī by the royal name Qandā, and stating that two Muslim rulers of the Zā dynasty bear names including the element Saney. However, he does not go any further in trying to understand the nature of this dynastic disruption, the possible involvement of Ghana and the Almoravids in it and the historical significance of the residence of the Zā-Zuwa kings in the trading town of Gao-Saney. By pointing out that the Almoravids themselves followed the prescriptions of Malikite jurists according to which tombstones have to be kept anonymous, he seems to suggest that the marble stelae from Almeria must have reached Gao through other channels. He thus fails to explain the organizational performance necessary for the fabrication of exactly dated stelae and their long distance transportation across the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa and the Sahara right down to Gao.

Furthermore, he goes into some detail concerning the metaphorical meaning of the name of the Prophet Muhammad and his two successors, but he does not use this evidence to consider the problem of the ethnic identity of the Zuwa kings nor their relations with the Almoravids. Admittedly, these questions are difficult to answer. Yet, there is a great difference between supposing a direct Almoravid intervention, a dynastic take-over (Hunwick 1999)<sup>2</sup>, an involvement of local Berber traders (Lange 1991) and a Ghanaian refugee king founding the Zā dynasty of Gao (Lange 1996, 2004)<sup>3</sup> on the one hand, and a purely local development without any external implications on the other (Farias 2003).

In fact, the present reviewer believes that the Zuwa kings of Gao-Saney greatly influenced the course of Gao history. Evidence for the long-lasting impact of the Zuwa on the political scene of Gao and its eastern hinterland comes mainly from the links between the royal inscriptions and the king lists incorporated into the Timbuktu chronicles. From these connections it can be deduced that the Zuwa kings are identical with the Zā of the chronicles – as Sauvaget once tried to establish<sup>4</sup> – and that they first ruled over the Gao kingdom as protégés of the Almoravids, later as independent kings and finally as vassals of Mali. Further evidence, not considered by Farias, comes from the Zarma oral traditions which postulate an origin of this presently Songhay speaking ethnic group from the lake region of the western arc of the Niger bend which was once the centre of the Ghana Empire. Hence the Zarma are composed of Soninke nobles and Proto-

Songhay commoners. As for the ethnogenesis of the Songhay it can be related to the emergence of the Sonni and their struggle against Malian suzerainty even more closely than Farias suggests: Properly speaking the Songhay came into being because of the rapprochement between the Sonni Mande elite and the debased Proto-Songhay nobility. Accordingly, the early traces of Songhay found in some inscriptions of the thirteenth century should be attributed rather to speakers of the language later called Songhay than to the Songhay themselves. Thus, the history of the Middle Niger tightly argued on the basis of internal and external written sources as well as on oral traditions provides us with sufficient evidence not only to retrace the main dynastic developments but also to reconstruct the circumstances of the ethnogenesis of two major peoples of West Africa, the Zarma and the Songhay.

The important issues of ethnic identity and ethnogenesis are only partly considered in the present book. Yet, by criticising the view of ethnic homogeneity presented by the Timbuktu chroniclers and by re-adjusting the chronological framework of Gao dynastic history on the basis of the largely unexploited inscriptional sources, Farias paves the way for a radical new way of looking at the history of the Middle Niger as a whole. His collection of inscriptions will certainly prove to be a lasting corner stone for all future studies of the medieval period of Gao history.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Sauvaget, "Les épitaphes royales de Gao", *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire*, série B 12, 2, 1950, 421, 424.

<sup>2</sup> J. O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: al-Sa'dī's Ta'riḫ al-sūdān down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, Leiden 1999 (reviewed in: *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 99, 2, 2004, 145–154).

<sup>3</sup> The two articles (1991, 1996) and a new essay titled "From Ghana and Mali to Songhay: the Mande factor in Gao history" are included in: D. Lange, *Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa: Africa-Centred and Canaanite-Israelite Perspectives. A Collection of Published and Unpublished Articles*, Dettelbach 2004 (2004a).

<sup>4</sup> J. Sauvaget, "Notes préliminaires sur les épitaphes royales de Gao", *Revue des Études Islamiques* 8, 1948/9, 5–12. See now Lange 2004a: 499–509.