

SANKORE'



Institute of Islamic - African Studies International

www.sankore.org/www.siiasi.org

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ وَصَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَى سَيِّدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ وَعَلَى آلِهِ وَصَحْبِهِ وَسَلَّمَ تَسْلِيمًا

CHAPTER II

THE ORIGIN OF THE SONNI

According to the accounts, the first *sonni*¹, Ali Kolon, belonged to the subservient tribes under the possession of the ruler of Mali.² He and his brother, Silman Nar, were the sons of Za-Yasibay. The original name of his brother was Sulayman, but it was altered due to their language. They were blood brothers with one father. As for the mother of Ali Kolon, her name was Ummaa and the name of the mother of Sulayman was Fati. She was the first of the wives of their father. He used to come to her often but she would never become pregnant. This continued until she lost hope in giving birth. She said to her husband, "You may marry my sister, Ummaa, so that you may acquire offspring, seeing that you cannot get them from me." Due to the fact that they were in a state of *jaahiliyya* and did not subscribe to Islamic virtuousness, he married her. They conceived in the first night and Ummaa became pregnant by the decree of Allah ta'ala. That same night Fati also conceived. Both women gave birth to boys who were placed upon the bare earth in an unlit house for one full day without being ritually washed. This was the custom for children born during the night. The first child to be washed was Ali Kolon, the older of the two. Then Silman Nar, the younger of the two was washed. When they both attained the age of strength, the ruler of Mali took both of them for his service. The reason for this was that the people of Songhay were under the sovereignty of the ruler of Mali, and it was the custom of the sons of the subjected kingdoms to be placed under the service of the ruler of Mali; and this remains the custom of all the rulers of the Sudan to this day. On some occasions the sons are returned to their land after serving the ruler, and on some occasions they remain in their service until they die³.

While Ali Kolon was in the service of the ruler of Mali he used to occasionally withdraw in order to learn useful sciences which would be of benefit by way of royal responsibilities. As a result when he returned to his own land, he became extremely intelligent, rational, cleaver and refined. He continued in this way of keeping himself hidden until he came near to his land of Songhay. Under this circumstance he was able to learn all of their methods. He then began to harbor the idea of opposing the ruler of Mali and escaping to his land. Thus he began endeavoring and preparing for this with those necessary items like weapons and provision which he had concealed in known places in route to Songhay.

¹ This family dynasty was also known as the *Si* dyansty.

² This ruler's name was Khalifa Mari Djata who ruled during the later part of the 13th century.

³ See Cheikh Anta Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*, (trans. H. Salemsen), New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, p. 109.

Eventually, his brother, Silman Nar, became aware and acquainted with his secret. They both began feeding fodder to horses which were the strongest, finest and most sound they could find. This was so that there would not be any fear of their inadequacy or fatigue. When they were prepared, they fled Mali heading for their land of Songhay. When the ruler of Mali realized that they had fled, he dispatched men on their trail in order to have them killed. Whenever the assassins were near to killing them, Ali and Silman would defeat them. The fighting between them continued until they were able to reach their land, Songhay.

When they arrived in their land, Ali Kolon was appointed as the ruler of the people of Songhay, and he was called *sonni*. He was able to break the chains of Malian sovereignty over his people.⁴ After Ali Kolon died, the authority was given to his brother, Silman Nar. Their kingdom did not expand beyond the borders of Songhay until the appearance of the renowned oppressive usurper, Sonni Ali. Under his rule Songhay reached way beyond the limits that any of the rulers before him had established in strength or the number of military forces. He put into operation many military raids, subjected many countries until his renown reached the lands of the east and the west. He was the last of the rulers of the Sonni dynasty with the exception of his son, Abu Bakar Da`u, who was given the authority after his death. Shortly after, the kingdom was seized from him by Askiya al-Hajj Muhammad. Discussion about Sonni ali will come later, if Allah wills.



Institute of Islamic-African Studies International

⁴ This political autonomy was short lived for in 1300, Sakura reestablished the rule of Mali over the Soninke.