

# Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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Edited by  
David Thomas and John Chesworth  
with Clinton Bennett, Lejla Demiri,  
Martha Frederiks, Stanisław Grodź, Douglas Pratt



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## CONTENTS

Foreword .....	vii
List of Illustrations .....	xi
List of Maps .....	xiii
Abbreviations .....	xiv
Peter Riddell, <i>Introduction: Christian-Muslim Relations in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Asia, Africa and the Americas)</i> .....	1
Barbara Watson Andaya, <i>Islam and Christianity in South-East Asia 1600-1700</i> .....	15
Martha Frederiks, <i>Enforced migration: an Indian Ocean Africa narrative</i> .....	29
David D. Grafton, <i>Enforced migration: an Atlantic narrative in Christian-Muslim relations</i> .....	49
Works on Christian-Muslim relations 1600-1700 .....	69
South Asia .....	71
South-East Asia, China and Japan .....	269
Africa and the Americas .....	467
Index of Names .....	623
Index of Titles .....	632

# Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī

Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad Bābā ibn Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥājj  
Aḥmad ibn ‘Umar ibn Muḥammad Aqīt al-Tinbukṭī;  
Aḥmad Bābā al-Masūfī al-Tinbukṭī; Aḥmad Bābā Es Sudane;  
Aḥmad Bābā the Black

DATE OF BIRTH 26 October 1556  
PLACE OF BIRTH Mali, possibly Araouane  
DATE OF DEATH 22 April 1627  
PLACE OF DEATH Timbuktu, Mali

## BIOGRAPHY

Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī was a renowned and prolific Muslim scholar from Songhay. He was born on 25 October 1556 into the Masūfa clan of the Aqīt, an illustrious lineage of Muslim scholars who belonged to the social and intellectual elite of Timbuktu. During most of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Timbuktu was in its heyday as capital of the gold trade and West Africa’s most important centre of Islamic learning, members of the Aqīt lineage held the office of *qāḍī*. Modern sources sometimes identify Araouane in present-day Mali as Aḥmad Bābā’s place of birth, though Paolo de Moraes Farias points out that no pre-19<sup>th</sup>-century source mentions this (Moraes Farias, ‘Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī’).

Aḥmad Bābā was educated in Timbuktu and studied grammar, exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence under Muḥammad Baghayogho al-Wangarī, his father Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥājj Aḥmad ibn ‘Umar ibn Muḥammad Aqīt and several other relatives. By the time Aḥmad Bābā was in his mid-thirties and had become a well-established scholar and author, Aḥmad al-Manṣūr of Morocco invaded Songhay; he conquered Timbuktu in 1591. This event dramatically changed life in the city and the position of the Aqīt lineage. In 1594, the *qāḍī* ‘Umar ibn Maḥmūd and other prominent figures from Timbuktu’s elite were accused of subversion against the rule of Aḥmad al-Manṣūr and deported to Marrakech as prisoners. Aḥmad Bābā was among the captives. Though his house arrest in Marrakech was lifted after two years, he was not allowed to return to Timbuktu until 1608, where he worked until his death in 1627.

Aḥmad Bābā was a prolific author and respected scholar; estimates of the number of books he wrote vary from approximately 40 to

approximately 70 (Moraes Farias, 'Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī'; Hunwick, 'New source', p. 570). His best known works are *Nayl al-ibtihāj bi-taṭrīz al-Dībāj* ('The attainment of joy through embroidering on the *Dībāj*'), a supplement to Ibn Farḥūn's biographical dictionary, discussing Mālikī scholars from the Maghreb and West Africa, written in 1596, and *Mi'rāj al-ṣu'ūd ilā nayl ḥukm mujallab al-Sūd* ('The ladder of ascent towards grasping the law concerning transported black Africans'), which discusses the legitimacy of the enslavement of Africans.

### MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

#### *Secondary*

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- E.N. Saad, *The social history of Timbuktu. The role of Muslim scholars and notables 1400-1900*, Cambridge, 1983
- M.A. Zouber, *Aḥmad Bābā de Tombouctou (1556-1627). Sa vie et son œuvre*, Paris, 1977
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- J.O. Hunwick, 'A new source for the biography of Ahmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī (1556-1627)', *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies* 27 (1964) 568-93
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### WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Mi'rāj al-ṣu'ūd ilā nayl ḥukm mujallab al-Sūd*,  
 'The ladder of ascent towards grasping the law  
 concerning transported black Africans'  
*Al-kashf wa-l-bayān li-aṣnāf majlūb al-Sūdān*,  
 'The exposition and explanation concerning the  
 varieties of transported black Africans'

DATE Late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

## DESCRIPTION

Aḥmad Bābā's *Mi'raj* is a short treatise (10 pages in print) that discusses the legitimacy of enslaving Africans. It is a *fatwā* in response to a query by a man called Sa'īd ibn Ibrāhīm al-Jirārī, who lived in the region of Tuwat in present-day southern Algeria (Novo, 'Islamic law', p. 5). Timothy Cleaveland hypothesises that al-Jirārī may have been a merchant involved in the trans-Saharan slave-trade, whilst Marta García Novo believes he was a scholar or a scholar-to-be (Cleaveland, 'Ahmad Baba', p. 49; Novo, 'Islamic law', p. 5). Similar questions were posed to Aḥmad Bābā by a man called Yūsuf ibn Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar al-Īsī, who Hunwick believes was a student of Aḥmad Bābā and the copyist of a manuscript of the text now kept in the Melville J. Herskovits Library of Africana in Evanston, Illinois (Hunwick, 'Aḥmad Bābā', pp. 131-2).

The exact date of the treatise is uncertain. Often 1615 is cited, but the copyist of the Evanston manuscript states that he copied the text in 1006 (1596), which points to an earlier date, at least for part of the text (Hunwick, 'Aḥmad Bābā', p. 132). At present, the Evanston manuscript is the oldest known version of the treatise.

According to the text, al-Jirārī seeks Aḥmad Bābā's opinion regarding 'slaves brought from a land the Islam of which has been well-known, such as the land of Bornu, 'Afna [Hausa], Kano, Gao, Katsina, etc. whose Islam is known far and wide' (Barbour and Jacobs, 'Mi'raj', p. 127). From al-Jirārī's queries it is evident that he was aware that enslaving Muslims was only legitimate when it concerned Muslims who had been forcibly converted to Islam or who had converted to Islam after being enslaved; free Muslims could not be legitimately enslaved. From the line of his reasoning, however, it is also evident that he associates 'being black' with slavery. Hence, he has sought guidance from Aḥmad Bābā as to whether black Africans who claim to be Muslims can be enslaved.

In his reply Aḥmad Bābā reiterates the classical positions regarding the enslavement of Muslims. This is followed by an adamant denunciation of race or ethnic belonging as legitimate grounds for enslavement; he underscores this by disavowing any link between the curse of Ham, skin-colour and slavery. Rather, he states, the only legitimate reason for enslavement is 'non-belief'. Therefore, in order to avoid acquiring a Muslim as a slave, the buyer is obliged to investigate the religious affiliation of the slave before completing his purchase. Aḥmad Bābā makes numerous references to earlier *fuqāhā'* to underscore his position.

He then applies the *fatwā* to the context of West Africa, stating that people who come from countries that have had a Muslim government

for a long time or from ethnic groups that are known to be Muslims cannot be enslaved, because they can be presumed to be Muslims. Towards the end of his *fatwā*, he gives a list of West African ethnic groups known to be Muslim as well as an overview of ethnic groups known to be unbelievers, possibly intended as a guide for al-Jirārī and other slave-traders. The lists also serve as an indication of the spread of Islam in West Africa in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Cleaveland observes that it is remarkable that Aḥmad Bābā does not address the fate of West African Muslim minority groups or recent converts who live in predominantly non-Muslim countries. Neither does Aḥmad Bābā mention the fact that, generally speaking, Mālikī jurisprudence rejects the enslavement of non-Muslims outside the context of a *jihād*. Cleaveland and Novo consider these hiatuses to be deliberate omissions, stating that Aḥmad Bābā seems to place the interests of the slave-traders above the freedom of people. They explain this by pointing to Aḥmad Bābā's social context, asserting it to be highly likely that members of his extended family were involved in trans-Saharan trade, a substantial part of which consisted of the slave-trade (Cleaveland, 'Ahmad Baba', p. 52; Novo, 'Islamic law', p. 14).

As part of the discussion of whether sub-Saharan unbelievers can be enslaved, Aḥmad Bābā draws on older texts that relate the subject of the legitimacy of enslaving African *kāfirūn* to legal opinions on enslaving Jews, Christians and *Majūs*. The *Mi'rāj* mentions Christians (*Naṣārā*) on four occasions, once referencing the *Muqaddima* of Ibn Khaldūn and three times referring to a *fatwā* on slavery by Makhḷūf al-Balbālī (d. 1533), a scholar from the oasis of Tabelbala (in present-day Algeria), who taught in Morocco as well as in West Africa. While the reference to Ibn Khaldūn serves to draw on the example of Abyssinian slaves in the time of Muḥammad, the *fatwā* by al-Balbālī connects the term 'Christians' with the notion 'unbelievers', who can be legitimately enslaved.

The *fatwā* demonstrates that there was a debate amongst Muslims in West Africa in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries about slavery against the background of the trans-Saharan rather than the trans-Atlantic slave-trade, as Paul Lovejoy seems to suggest (Lovejoy, 'Context of enslavement', pp. 9-19). Aḥmad Bābā's *Mi'rāj* was a highly influential work, which continued to be copied and re-copied within the Maghreb and West Africa, and was repeatedly cited in discussions regarding slavery (Cleaveland, 'Ahmad Baba', p. 49).



Illustration 12. Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Mi'raj al-ṣu'ūd ilā nayl ḥukm mujallab al-Sūd*

SIGNIFICANCE

Aḥmad Bābā's *Mi'raj* is one of the first, if not the first, West African Muslim text known to mention Christians. It is uncertain whether Aḥmad Bābā was personally acquainted with Christians, though he may have encountered them during his period of detainment in Marrakech. In the *fatwā*, however, 'Christians' are merely a category, rather than a reference to actual people of flesh and blood.

Drawing on al-Balbālī, Aḥmad Bābā considers Christians to be *kāfirūn*, stating: 'the Sudanese non-believers are like other *kāfir* whether they are Christians, Jews, Persians, Berbers, or any others who stick to non-belief and do not embrace Islam' (Barbour and Jacobs, 'The Mi'raj', pp. 129-30). Although he mentions that 'there is no difference between all the *kuffār* except the ones protected by treaty, the people of the *dhimmī* [allied people] and the *murtaddin* [apostates]', he does not seem to classify Christians as *dhimmīs* (Barbour and Jacobs, 'The Mi'raj', pp. 136). He reiterates this classification of Christians as *kāfir* when he discusses the Prophet's position on slave-possession and more particularly on the possession of Abyssinian slaves. He writes: 'The Abyssinians of that time were *kuffār* except those who embraced Islam like the *Negus* [Emperor of Ethiopia], I mean *Aṣḥama*. Thus, it was legal to own those seized from them because those who possessed them were very sure of their condition and their infidelity' (Barbour and Jacobs, 'The Mi'raj', p. 131). He makes mention in his text of the fact that at the time of the Prophet Abyssinia was a predominantly Christian country, but does not indicate that because of

this they may have been considered ‘people of the *dhimmī*’. This seems to imply that in Aḥmad Bābā’s view Christians could legitimately be enslaved.

#### PUBLICATIONS

The *Miʿrāj al-ṣuʿūd* was copied extensively over time; MSS from various periods exist. Listed below are some of the oldest.

- MS Evanston, Northwestern University, J. Melville Herskovits Africana Library – Hunwick 535-545 (1596; shorter version)
- MS Timbuktu, Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library (about 1615)
- MS Rabat, Bibliothèque général de Rabat – D478, fols 115-34 (1781)
- MS Paris, BNF – 5259, fols 19-23 (late 19<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Rabat, Bibliothèque du palais royal – 7248 (n.d.)
- MS Rabat, Bibliothèque générale de Rabat – J100, D194, D478, D1724 (n.d.)
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- O. Kane and J.O. Hunwick, *Arabic literature of Africa*, vol. 4. *Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, Leiden, 2003, pp. 17-31
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- Barbour and Jacobs, 'Mi'raj'
- M.A. Zouber, *Ahmad Bābā de Tombouctou (1556-1627). Sa vie et son œuvre*, Paris, 1977, pp. 129-46

**Martha Frederiks**