

## Muslim Reform in Songhay

Around 1500 Askia Muhammad al-Turi, the first Muslim among the rulers of Songhay wrote to the North African Muslim theologian Muhammad al-Maghili (d. 1504) with a series of questions about proper Muslim practices. These excerpts are from the seventh question of al-Tan and the answers given by al-Maghili. Here one sees something of the zeal of the new convert to conform to traditional religious norms, as well as the rather strict and puritanical “official line” of the conservative Maliki ulama on “pagan” mores. Also evident is the king’s desire for bettering social order and his concern for justice in the market and elsewhere. However, also manifest is that many of the more strongly Shari ‘a-mindedulama did not want to compromise at all, let alone allow syncretism to emerge among formerly pagan, newly converted groups.

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### From Al-Turi’s Seventh Question

Among the people [of the Songhay Empire said Askia Muhammad], there are some who claim knowledge of the supernatural through sand divining and the like, or through the disposition of the stars . . . [while] some assert that they can write (talismans) to bring good fortune. . . or to ward off bad fortune. . . . Some defraud in weights and measures.

One of their evil practices [continued Askia Muhammad] is the free mixing of men and women in the markets and streets and the failure of women to veil themselves.

[while] among the people of Djenné [Jenne] it is an established custom for a girl not to cover any part of her body as long as she remains a virgin. . . and all the most beautiful girls walk about naked among people.

So give us legal ruling concerning these people and their ilk, and may God Most High reward you!

### From Al-Maghili’s Answer

The answer-and God it is who directs to the right course— is that everything you have mentioned concerning people’s behavior in some parts of this country is gross error. It is the bounden duty of the commander of the Muslims and all other believers who have the power [replied alMaghili] to change every one of these evil practices.

As for any who claims knowledge of the supernatural in the ways you have mentioned... he is a liar and an unbeliever. . . . Such

people must be forced to renounce it by the sword. Then whoever renounces such deeds should be left in peace, but whoever persists should be killed with the sword as an unbeliever; his body should not be washed or shrouded, and he should not be buried in a Muslim graveyard.

As for defrauding in weights and measures [continued al-Maghili] it is forbidden (*haram*) according to the Qur’an, the Sunna and the consensus of opinion of the learned men of the Muslim community. It is the bounden duty of the commander of the Muslims to appoint a trustworthy man in charge of the markets, and to safeguard people’s means of subsistence. He should standardize all the scales in each province. . . . Similarly, all measures both large and small must be rectified so that they conform to a uniform standard.

Now, what you mentioned about the free mixing of men and women and leaving the pudenda uncovered is one of the greatest abominations. The commander of the Muslims must exert himself to prevent all these things.

He should appoint trustworthy men to watch over this by day and night, in secret and in the open. This is not to be considered as spying on the Muslims; it is only a way of caring for them and curbing evildoers, especially when corruption becomes widespread in the land as it has done in Timbuktu and Djenné [Jenne] and so on.

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