

Abstract

History is the great humaniser¹

This dissertation is about the social history of Timbuktu during the colonial era (1894 – 1960). Scholars have written about Timbuktu and its intellectual tradition since the beginning of twentieth century more so the last forty years. They have used the city's written sources made up of thousands of manuscript materials found all over in Timbuktu and its surrounding world's desert and village archives. However, these scholars have worked only on the city's famous seventeenth and eighteenth-century chronicles (*tarikhs*), a few theological treatises and political correspondences of the nineteenth century. From annotated translations to analyses and monograms, their works were limited to the above sources. This dissertation, firstly, takes *fatwās* from Timbuktu's archives as its historical source, a source the aforementioned scholars paid very little attention to or consciously ignored. Although *fatwās* are legal documents, this dissertation shows that *fatwās* are a historical source. Secondly, it looks at the history of ordinary men and women in their everyday lives. Hitherto, the earlier looked at events shaped around Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire's political and religious elite only. Can Timbuktu's *fatwās* tell stories about themselves and about the ordinary men and women who appear in them? This dissertation is inclined to the affirmative. Timbuktu's *fatwās* can do that. Timbuktu's colonial-era *fatwās* show, for example, that wives contracted subsequent marriages while still legally married, refused to travel with or to husbands, and abandoned the marital home. They show that husbands travelled leaving their wives behind remaining away for long periods of time; others married secretly without letting

¹ Barzun, J and Graff, H.F. 1992. *The Modern Researcher*, fifth edition. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, pg. 9

their existing families know. We scratch beneath the surface of the questions people asked the scholars, their utterances and actions as the *fatwās* describe them as well as the answers of *muftīs*. In this way we reconstruct Timbuktu's colonial-era history from below.