By the beginning of the 19th century, a sector of the nomadic Kounta shaykhs of the southern Sahara had also gained administrative control over Timbuktu. Through the network of zawiyas they had gained great influence on customs and conduct across the region, both in matters of trade and in daily life. Their disciples carried the Qadiriyya ṭarīqa widely over West Africa. They worked to retain the independence of Timbuktu in the face of concerted attempts at domination by the Fulani of Masina.63

The Kounta were renowned as promoters of peace, but even they were obliged to resort to force when their authority over Timbuktu was challenged by jihadist Tukulors led by Umar Tall.

THE FULANI OPPOSITION
For forty years, starting in 1846, the Kounta’s authority in Timbuktu was under attack from jihads launched from the Fulani state of Hamdallahi in Masina, a region south of the Inland Delta of the River Niger. This Qadiriyya-inspired regime was founded by Ahmadu Lobbo, who claimed to be the spiritual successor of Askia Muhammad, and it was initially supported by the leadership of the Kounta, despite many differences. One of these concerned the segregation of women. While Ahmadu Lobbo and his descendants believed women should be segregated from men in accordance with the teachings of Islam, the Kounta protested, knowing this was against the customs of the desert people and would incite strong resistance.64 Lobbo also attempted to impose a ban on the consumption of tobacco, one of the trade items from which the Kounta had prospered.

In 1846 Ahmad al-Bakkay al-Kounti negotiated a pact with the Fulani of Masina under which the administration of Timbuktu remained in Songhay hands, but with a Fulani judge (qadi) and tax-collector who supervised the payment of an agreed tribute. Ahmad al-Bakkay al-Kounti was a grandson of al-Mukhtar al-Kabir who had succeeded to the religious and political leadership of the Kounta. In 1853 the German scholar and explorer
Heinrich Barth witnessed how the Fulani oppressed the people of Timbuktu: "The [Fulani] had obtained...a slight advantage in political superiority, and they followed it up without hesitation and delay by levying a tax of 2,000 shells upon each full-grown person, under the pretext that they did not say their Friday prayers in the great mosque as they were ordered to do... Besides levying this tax upon the inhabitants in general, they also devised means to subject to a particular punishment the Arab part of the population who had especially countenanced the shaykh [al-Bakkay] in his opposition against their order to drive me (Heinrich Barth) out, by making a domiciliary search through their huts, and taking away some sixty or eighty bales of tobacco, an article which forms a religious and political contraband under the severe and austere rule of the Fulani in this quarter."

Masina was subsequently occupied by rival Tukulors (a group ethnically close to the Fulani) under the leadership of Umar Tall, originally from Futa Toro in what is now northern Senegal. On his return from pilgrimage to Mecca, Umar Tall had joined the Tijaniyya and adopted a more political and militant practice of Sufism than the region was accustomed to. He and his followers fell into conflict, both intellectual and military, with adherents of the Qadiriyya in the Niger Bend and with the established Bambara state of Segu. Umar Tall launched a jihad and led a large group of Tukulor north, occupying regions to Masina and then up to Timbuktu in 1862. There, to the distress of the Kounta, he attempted to force the Tijaniyya tariqa on the people of Timbuktu.

Al-Bakkay was much against jahads since he felt they bred tyrants, and he pleaded with Umar Tall to seek peaceful solutions to their differences; but when agreement broke down, he too was forced to put down his pen and take up his sword. He went on the attack with help from rivals of Umar Tall including Tuareg and Songhay elements. They joined forces with contingents of the defeated Fulani of Masina to besiege Hamdallahi, regaining Timbuktu and conquering Masina in 1864. Umar Tall fled to suffer a mysterious death in
the land of the Dogon south of Masina. Al-Bakkay died soon after in 1865 during an attempted Tukulor counterattack at Saredina, where he was buried.

Of the Kounta, Barth observed: ‘It is really surprising that a family of peaceable men should exercise such an influence over these wild hordes, who are continually waging war against each other, merely from their supposed sanctity and their purity of manners.’

EUROPEAN EXPLORATION

Barth was not the only European witness to the early Fulani hostilities. There was great popular fascination with Timbuktu in early 19th-century Europe, and a race was launched to be the first to come to the ‘great city of gold’. Very little was known of the economic and geographic realities of the region: the full course of the River Niger was not drawn on European maps until after 1830. Hitherto European cartographers, following medieval Arab and Jewish maps, had shown a connection between the Niger and the Nile, or alternatively represented the Niger as originating in an area around Lake Chad and flowing westwards to Senegal. In sum, Europeans knew less about the region than Arab historians of the 10th–11th centuries. European adventurers were sent one after another to explore these uncharted territories. One after another, they succumbed to tropical diseases or were killed by hostile locals who felt threatened by rival trading interests or who believed Christians had no business in Islamic territories.

The first European to reach Timbuktu and return alive was the Frenchman René Caillié who, disguised as an Arab, entered West Africa through Senegal and spent two weeks in the city in 1828. He recollected how: ‘On entering this mysterious city, which is an object of curiosity and research to the civilized nations of Europe, I experienced an indescribable satisfaction... Timbuktu must contain at most about ten or twelve thousand inhabitants. The population is at times augmented by the Arabs, who come with the caravans, and remain a while in the city. The streets are clean, and
sufficiently wide to permit three horsemen to pass abreast. Both within and around the town there are many straw huts of a circular form, like those of the pastoral Fulani. Timbuktu contains seven mosques, two of which are large; each is surmounted by a brick tower.\textsuperscript{169}

Heinrich Barth was sent by, and on behalf of, the British government to West Africa to evaluate the potential of establishing commercial relations in the region. After almost three years of travelling through Muslim lands in West Africa from Lake Chad, he reached Timbuktu in 1853 and stayed for seven months. Being fluent in Arabic he thought he could disguise himself as a Muslim, but his Christian biases were soon revealed. The first European explorer to reach Timbuktu, Gordon Laing, who arrived there two years before Caillière in 1826, had been murdered on his return voyage across the Sahara. Barth fared better. When he left Timbuktu, al-Bakkay al-Kounti accompanied him to beyond Gao and gave him a letter of recommendation, which served to protect him all the way to the banks of Lake Chad:

'Do not be deluded by those who say, "Behold, he is a Christian! Let no kindness be shown to him! Let it be counted acceptable to God to hurt him!" for such sentiments are contrary to the Koran and the Sunna, and are repudiated by men of intelligence. It is written, "God does not forbid your showing kindness and equite to those who do not wage war with you on account of your religion, nor expel you from your abodes, for God loves the equitable."

Thanks to al-Bakkay’s protection, Heinrich Barth made it home and wrote one of the great accounts of Central Africa and the Niger Bend.

**FRENCH COLONIZATION**

The process of French colonization of what was referred to as French West Africa or the French Sudan largely took place between 1880 and 1892. The French began to move in from their colony in Senegal in the 1880s, dismantling piece by piece the Islamic empire which had been established.
Although geographically isolated, the people of Timbuktu are in tune with the outside world via radio, the internet, mobile phones and an array of technology left behind by tourists and development projects.

Ibrahim Abbas, son of the watchman at the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu. Aged nine in this photo, Ibrahim is an aspiring photographer.

by Umar Tall. However, the Tuareg resisted and retained control over the desert regions for over a decade. In 1880 the French Colonel Flatters wrote to the Tuareg chief of the Hoggar in Algeria requesting safe passage through the Sahara. The chief replied saying he had received and understood his request, but that he would not comply. Flatters took the risk and he and most of his men had their throats cut; the rest were poisoned.27

In the closing years of the 19th century, two great grandsons of Kounta chief al-Mukhtar al-Kabir adopted opposing stances to French colonial overrule. Zayn al-Abidin declared a jihad against the French, following their occupation of Timbuktu in 1894, and continued to harass them in the first two decades of the 20th century. Shaykh Bay bin Sidi Umar, a scholar and man of saintly repute, took up residence in the Adrar-n-Iforas in the northern Sahara and encouraged both the Iforas and the Hoggar Tuareg to avoid conflict with the French. He came to be recognized by the French as a judicial authority in the region, though he held no formal post.

By 1894 French forces had conquered as far inland as Timbuktu. For the first time since the brief Mossi invasion of 1343, Timbuktu was controlled by non-Muslims. However, the French succeeded in defeating the Tuareg only following a long struggle, finally extending their control to the northern regions of the Sahara as late as 1916.28

The imposition of the French language and French schools by the colonial administration had a devastating effect on the scholarly traditions of the region. The Arabic language was superseded by French in all administrative affairs and the Arabic madrasas were converted to French m'dersas designed to promote French educational objectives within an Islamic context. The Tuareg continued to resist French domination by refusing to send their children to French schools. Families hid away their treasures including their collections of manuscripts for fear they would be confiscated by the colonial powers.