**Two Solitudes Write-Up – Ms. Gluskin**

Part A: Context – not in-role

Askia Muhammad and non-Muslim residents of Songhai Empire

Politically, Askia came to be ruler of the Songhai Empire in 1493. Prior to giving his name to the new dynasty – Askia dynasty – he was known as Muhammad Ture (Gilbert and Reynolds, *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present, p. 93)*.The region of West Africa had already come under the influence of Islam which had spread out from the Middle East centuries earlier. In fact, Askia ruled from the city of Gao and controlled Timbuktu,a major centre of learning in Islam in West Africa (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 66*)*.* Economically, the empire was known for trade. This is significant in that it was mainly merchants and the rulers and their families in cities who were Muslims. The countryside remained non-Muslim (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 66*). Thus, ordinary non-Muslims might have felt doubly detached, **from their** **perspective,** from their new leader because of the economic and political power held by Muslims. Their fate was in **decline**. Religiously, Askia wished to distinguish himself from the previous ruler, Sonni Ali, whom Askia considered to be a bad Muslim. Before, Sonni Ali tried to pay attention to the Muslims and the non-Muslims (who had been there before conversion had even occurred). But this made him unpopular with urban Muslims who perceived him not to be a true believer. Muslim scholars (the *ulama*) declared him not a Muslim (Gilbert and Reynolds, *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present, p. 94).* This is the ruling and religious context into which Askia appeared. He took Islam seriously and wished to use it as a tool for governing the state. To do so, he gave more rights to Islamic scholars, led a jihad (holy war) against enemies, and went on pilgrimage to Islam’s holiest city, Mecca, in 1495 (a requirement for all Muslims during their lifetime) (Gilbert and Reynolds, *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present, p. 94).* This could have been seen as a **turning point** for non-Muslims in Songhai because they might have now felt a **change** toward insecurity after being tolerated during Sonni Ali’s rule. Surely this was a profound change that had significant **consequences** in their lives. The pilgrimage highlights Askia’s **new** efforts to publicly show off his Islamic credentials; he didn’t just go to Mecca - he led the pilgrimage and made a big ceremony of it like the region’s most famous previous ruler – a **continuity** with Mansa Musa from the 1300s was a big feather in Askia’s cap (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 66*). As well, historians call Askia’s influence “Islamizing” as he made the Quran the official law and Arabic the official language (Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Muhammad I Askia.”). He also appointed a governor of each conquered region to rule more efficiently. All governors were from his royal family and other nobles (Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Muhammad I Askia.”).

**Part B: Summary of Disparities – in role**

**Askia Muhammad**: I am influential and powerful. I am able to change the way the Songhai Empire is governed. I elevate the role of Islam in my state to the point where it is the official religion (Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Muhammad I Askia.”). And similarly, I lift up the holy language of the Quran, Arabic, to its esteemed level as official language of Songhai (Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Muhammad I Askia.”). I allow those who follow the one true religion to prosper – the merchants, the nobles, the scholars, the religious clergy (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 66*).

**Non-Muslim in Songhai Empire**: I come from people who are humble, powerless and non-influential. I have no access to the ruler who treats me as a foreigner eligible for enslavement (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 66*). I am not a wealthy merchant living in a city imbued with the ruler’s attention and blessing (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 66*). There does not seem to be much I can do to get the tolerance of my chosen polytheistic religion back that I once had under the previous dynasty (Gilbert and Reynolds, *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present, p. 94)*.

**Part C: Dialogue in-role**

*Askia is the ruler of the Songhai Empire. Fala is in ordinary, non-Muslim person who resides in the countryside and has travelled to petition the king.*

*Askia sits on his throne. Fala enters in a crouched position and parks himself far from the ruler but within earshot.*

**Askia**: What has brought you to the city of Gao to speak to your ruler?

**Fala:** Thank you for letting me speak to you in this unusual circumstance. I have travelled far to be granted this privilege. I wish to tell you about my people, who are not prospering as much as your fellow Muslims.

**Askia**: I am well aware of that. I have done that **purposefully as a king**, for I have followed the advice of the great scholar Al-Maghili, who clearly said your kin are “an unbelieving people who worship idols of trees and stones.” (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 66*)

**Fala**: I am familiar with this pronouncement of the infamous scholar. Do you truly believe that because I believe in many gods I am unworthy of freedom?

**Askia**: Yes, Al–Maghili is forthright, and it is very unfortunate that your previous ruler, Sonni Ali, gave you such freedom. Maghili has decreed that Ali and his kind “are no doubt among the most unjust oppressors and miscreants, who cut usunder what God has ordained to be joined and commit mischief in the earth.” (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 66*)

**Fala**: Sir, I believe your religion values human lives! Whatever your opinion of Sonni Ali, please consider the effects of Maghili’s pronouncements on my people.

**Askia**: I have considered them. Your people are lucky to live under my enlightened and efficient rule. I have turned my state into an expansive power. I have enriched us further through trade. I have brought us into the great community of Islamic powers.

**Fala:** Sir, you are right about how much more powerful the state is. My people feel its power. **It makes our knees shake.** But we are not the wealthy merchants and nobles who reside in your city and luxuriate in your court.

**Askia**: Of course not. As I said before, I follow the words of Al-Maghili. As a true believer, it is incumbent upon me to incentivize you to convert to the religion of Allah. I led a grand pilgrimage to the most holy city, Mecca, to make it clear to all the world that I am a follower of Muhammad and will lead my state appropriately thus.

**Fala:** Yes, sir. That has been made abundantly clear**.** Please, sir, we are at your mercy. Maghili’s words threaten to enslave us.

**Askia:** Ah yes, I well know his consequence for people such as you: “the born unbeliever, his offspring and his wives are to be made captives and his property is to be divided up. There is no divergence over that among the scholars.” (Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History, p. 67*)

**Fala**: Sir, would your benevolent God and your wise prophet want you to enslave the people that grow your food and contribute so much to your advanced state yet have no golden key to the palace gate?

**Askia:** If that’s what the scholars say, then I must abide by their words. After all, I have given the scholars a stronger position in Songhai’s society and government (Gilbert and Reynolds, *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present, p. 94).* Do you not understand that Islam could bring you a better life?

**Fala:** Perhaps this is true, sir. My people will take that under advisement. But we humbly ask that you not undertake a jihad against us. And we defer to your highness as we kindly remind you that we are people who contribute to the betterment of your empire through farming and herding and our peaceful presence.

**Askia**: You are dismissed. I have an empire to run.

*Fala backs up out of the room. Askia continues his daily schedule.*