

## **Timbuktu: A Paramount Mediaeval Centre of Trade and Knowledge**

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### *Abstract*

The present article aims at showing the importance of Timbuktu as being one of the most important centres of trade and knowledge during the Mediaeval times. First, light is shed on the different hypotheses about the etymology of Timbuktu. Second, there will be an attempt to illustrate the role of Timbuktu as being a linking point between black West Africa, and the rest of the world through North African merchants. In this context, a special concern is devoted to the Trans-Saharan trade; its routes, centres, and the different commodities that were used to pass through. The last part of the article is devoted to the importance of Timbuktu as a world leading centre of learning in the Middle Ages. In this respect, the focus falls on some achievements that characterize the golden age of this city, particularly, the old mosques (Jingarey Ber, Sankore and Sidi Yahya) that bear a unique architecture reflecting a highly sophisticated Islamic civilization, in addition to the old manuscripts, which are still as evidence of the scientific development that the city enjoyed in the Mediaeval times.

### تمبكتو: معلم تجاري وثقافي في العصر الوسيط

يهدف المقال الى إبراز الدور الذي كانت تلعبه تمبكتو خلال العصر الوسيط كمركز تجاري وحضاري مرموق، ليس في غرب إفريقيا فحسب بل وفي العالم أيضاً؛ من خلال المقال سنسلط الضوء على نشأة هذه المدينة ونعرض مختلف الفرضيات المتعلقة بأصل تسميتها، إضافة الى ذلك سنحاول إبراز مكانة تمبكتو كمركز تجاري وملقى للقوافل التجارية، وكهزمة وصل بين المراكز التجارية في شمال وغرب إفريقيا جنوب الصحراء في أوج ازدهارها، تجارة الذهب، الملح والعبود في إطار ما يسمى بالتجارة العابرة للصحراء عندما كان يمر بالمركز التجاري للمدينة ثلثا الإنتاج العالمي من الذهب؛ كما يتناول المقال الجانب الثقافي والحضاري للمدينة باعتباره مركزاً ذائع الصيت للعلوم والمعرفة خلال العصر الوسيط عندما كانت جامعة سنكوي بتمبكتو مقصدا لطلاب العلم من مختلف أنحاء العالم حيث ناهز عدد طلبتها خمسة وعشرين ألفاً في تخصصات مختلفة كالطب والكيمياء، الفيزياء، الجغرافيا الفلك، الرياضيات، بالإضافة الى علوم القرآن والحديث والنحو والبلاغة الخ... كما يتناول المقال بعض الشواهد الدالة على عمق وقوة حضارة هذه المدينة في القرون الوسطى حين كانت أوروبا تعيش على هامش الحضارة، ومن هذه الشواهد المادية ثالوث الحضارة والعلوم المتمثل في مسجد يجنغريبر وسيدي يحيى وجامعة سنكوري. هذه الشواهد الشامخة الى الآن تعكس حقاً مرور حضارة إسلامية راقية بالمنطقة منذ قرون خلت، وإضافة الى هذه الشواهد سنحاول إبراز غنى المدينة من حيث المخطوطات القديمة والمصير الذي آلت إليه بالإضافة إلى مختلف المحاولات الرامية إلى إنقاذ ما يمكن إنقاذه منها .

## **Introduction**

The present article deals with the importance of the city of Timbuktu as a paramount centre of trade and learning during the Middle Ages. The work is divided into two main parts; the first is devoted to the importance of Timbuktu as a trade centre that used to link black West Africa to Europe and Asia through North African middlemen. In this context, a special concern is given to trans-Saharan trade, and the caravans that used to transport European manufactured goods, dates and cereals from north African trade centres south across the desert to Timbuktu to be exchanged for gold and slaves. The second part deals with the achievements that made of Timbuktu one of the famous centres of learning in the world in the Mediaeval times, the most important of which is the establishment of the Sankore university where as many as 25,000 students were studying different topics ranging between theological and secular disciplines. Light is also shed on the manuscripts as evidence that the Africans had not had only a written tradition in the past, but they were ahead of the other nations in terms of science and knowledge. A number of sources are used to achieve this work, some date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century like the two most famous books that dealt with the history of West Africa in that period, that is, *Tarikh es-Soudan* and *Tarikh el-Fettach*. Others, are written by European explorers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in addition to some TV documentaries particularly, “A Journey to the Empire of Knowledge” and “The lost Libraries of Timbuktu” produced respectively by Dr A. H. Quick, and R. Trayler-Smith.

At the beginning, it is worth noting that almost all the sources that dealt with the history of West Africa in the mediaeval times were written in Arabic by Arab, Berber and African geographers and historians, since there were no direct contacts between the Africans and the Europeans until the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The most important of these sources were: *El Massalik wal Mamalik* by Abu Obeid El Bekri<sup>13</sup> who was born in Cordoba in 1068, *Tarikh el Fettach* by Mahmud Ka'ati<sup>14</sup>, *Tarikh es-Soudan* by Abderrahmane Es-Sa'adi<sup>15</sup> and *Tedzkiret en Nissian fi Akhbar Moulouk es-Soudan* translated from Arabic into French by Octave Houdas. These sources are known as the great *tarikhs* (the plural form of history in Arabic), and are considered as the main sources on which western historians relied in their writings about the history of medieval West Africa<sup>16</sup>. However, the extent to which these sources are reliable, and the events are objectively reported and described and agreed upon among

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<sup>13</sup> Abu Obeid Allah ibn Abd El Aziz ibn Muhamad Ibn Ayyub Ibn Amr, known by El Bakri (? – 1094). He comes from the Arab tribe Bakr, he spent most of his life in Cordoba where he wrote most of his books. Source:

عبدالقادر زبادية، دراسة عن افريقيا جنوب الصحراء في مآثر مؤلفات العرب و المسلمين، ديوان المطبوعات الجامعية، 2010-05، ص. 145

<sup>14</sup> Mahmud Ka'ati ( 1468 – 1593) he was born in Timbuktu where he hold high official posts, he taught the great scholar Ahmad Baba, he wrote *Tarikh el Fettach fi Akhbar el Buldan wal Juyuch wa Akabir en-Nas*. Source:

نفس المرجع، ص. 122

<sup>15</sup> Abdulrahman Ibn Abdullah Ibn Imran Ibn Amir Ibn el Haj al Mutwakil Es-Sa'adi, had born in Timbuktu before it was invaded by the Moroccans in 1591.

He had died before he finished his well known book, *Tarikh es-Soudan*.

Source: المرجع، ص. 122

<sup>16</sup> Jean Boulnoi et Boubou Hama, Empire de Gao Histoire, Cotumes et Magie des Sonrai, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Paris, 1954, p.10

historians is still open to discussion. Generally, the *Tarikhs* describing the city of Timbuktu and the wider region were written with the purpose of supporting the existing rulers. They are also drawn from written records as well as oral traditions reinterpreting the past on the light of subsequent events, therefore they should be read carefully, because history is generally written for the ruling powers to the detriment of those who came before (the previous rulers).

For instance, Mahmud Ka'ati who wrote about the history of the Songhay's rulers was one of their nephews, so we do not expect him to be against the Askias. When we read *Tarikh el Fettach* we find some arguments supporting the Askias and condemning the Soni though both are from the same clan, but from opposing sides because of a political bias. Similarly, in *Tarikh es-Soudan*, Es-Sa'adi shows a clear support to the Moroccan rulers who were in power in the empire of Songhay at that time.

According to Ismail Diadié Haidara<sup>17</sup>, Curator, Fondo Kati Fondo, there exists another source of information about the history of West Africa which is more reliable because it is free of any political bias. This source is known as Ajami<sup>18</sup>, it describes the history and traditions of the local peoples in

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<sup>17</sup> Ismail Diadié Haidara is a Malian scholar, Curator of the of the Fondo Kati Library and a descendent of the Songhay historian Mahmud Ka'ati who wrote *Tarikh es-Soudan*

<sup>18</sup> Ajami is an Arabic word which means any language except Arabic. In Arabic, it is written عجمي

local languages written in Arabic scripts. In other words, it tells the history of the local peoples when the *Trikhs* are not concerned. In short, Ajami presents the oral tradition in written sources. It deals with everything; poetry, folksongs, social and religious events, etc. Ismail Haidara adds: **“when you walk in streets and you find a mother breastfeeding her baby while singing those folksongs, it is there where the truth lies. It is a whole culture of which we do not make most of today, but we should, because an accurate comprehension of the African history and culture cannot be without the Ajami texts.”**<sup>19</sup>

## I. The Location, Origin and Foundation of Timbuktu

There is convergence among historians and geographers as to the location and foundation of Timbuktu, however its origin generates a number of hypotheses, the most important of which are examined in the following paragraphs.

### 1. Location:

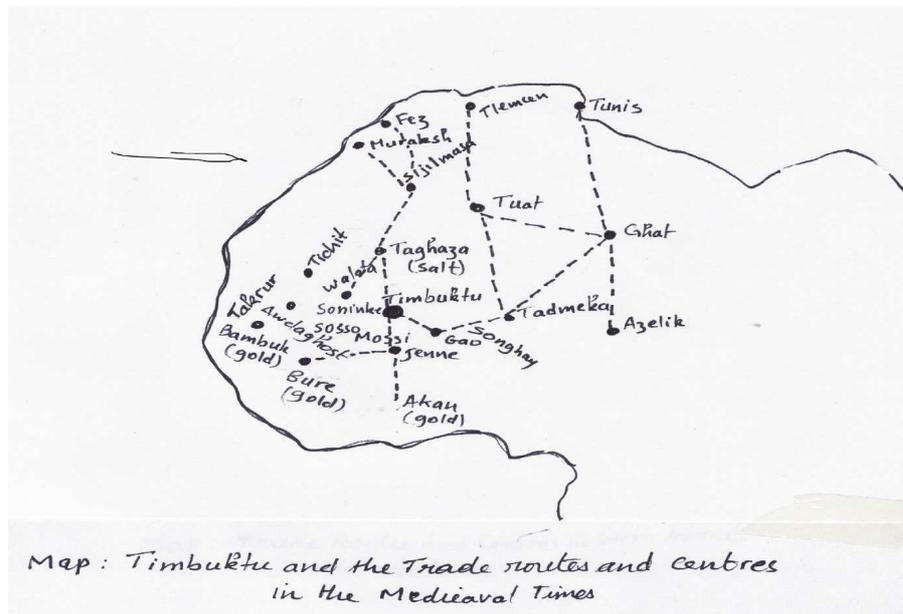
The Tuareg<sup>20</sup> have been the main ethnic group to inhabit the Sahara for centuries, their knowledge and

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<sup>19</sup>According to a documentary, produced and directed by Richard Trayler-Smith, presented by Aminata Forna, BBC4, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> The Tuareg are the Messufa descendent from the Sanhaja tribes whose origin is from Himyar in Yemen. Source: Abderrahman Es Sa'di, Tarikh Es Soudan, Traduction de O. Houdas, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Maisonneuve, Paris, 1981, p.42

experience about the desert gave them control of the trade routes that run from the North and the East and led to the Niger. Thus, by the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, the most important and safest routes had focused on the region with the Niger bend eastward, therefore, the creation of Timbuktu was no accident but a commercial necessity. (See the Map) The location of the first settlement still exists up to day under the name of *Toumbouktou-Koy-Batouma* etymologically referring to the place of the owner of Tombouktou, and it is situated at about 50 metres to the south of the famous mosque of Sidi Yahya<sup>21</sup>.



<sup>21</sup> Boubou Hama, Histoire des Songhay, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1968, pp. 321-322

## 2. Origin:

Timbuktu's etymology is still open to discussion. Different attempts have been made to explain the origin of this name. The first is based on the lively oral tradition tale; Tuareg tribesmen set up base camps around a well near a bank of the northern bend of the Niger River where they used to leave their luggage to be supervised by a woman named Buktu when they go to graze their livestock. Hence Timbuktu is a compound of two words *timand* Buktu; the former means a well in Tamasheq, the language spoken by the Tuareg, the latter is the name of that woman. Since then the location took this name the 'well of Buktu'<sup>22</sup>. The second version is given by Es sa'adi<sup>23</sup> in his book *Tarikh es-Soudan*. He reports that Timbuktu was founded by the Tuareg Maghcharen by the end of the 5th century A.H. where they used to leave their belongings and provisions to be looked after at a slave woman of theirs called Tinbuktu, and gradually the location grew into a crossroads for travellers coming and going. By the time, the

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<sup>22</sup>A documentary produced and directed by Richard Trayler-Smith, presented by Aminata Forna, BBC4, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Abderrahman ben Abdallah ben Imran ben Amir Es Sa'di (or Sâ'idi) born on May [28th, 1596](#) in Timbuktu and died in 1656. He worked as a lawyer in Jenny, then in 1627 he was appointed Imam of the Sankore mosque. In 1655 he wrote his famous book '*Tarikh es Soudan*' in which he gave a detailed description of the empire of Songhay from its foundation until the Moroccan invasion. Source: [http://fr.wikipedia.org/abderrahmane\\_es\\_sadi](http://fr.wikipedia.org/abderrahmane_es_sadi)

blessed spot where she encamped took her name<sup>24</sup>.The third version is introduced by Leo Africanus, who argues that Timbuktu was originally Tinbutu (wall of Buktu) a compound noun that comes from the Songhay language. It consists of two words, *tin* which means Wall in the Songhay, and Buktu to which he did not give an explanation. The fourth explanation developed by the Malian historian Sekene Cissoko states that Timbuktu comes from a Berber origin, a word composed of two parts: **“*tim*, the feminine form of *In* (place of) and ‘bouctou’, a small dune. Hence, Timbuktu would mean a place covered by small dunes.”**<sup>25</sup>The last explanation is introduced by the French Orientalist René Basset who argues that: **“The name derives from the Zenaga, a Berber language that was spoken in Mauritania, meaning "to be distant" or "hidden. The meaning "hidden" could point to the city's location in a slight hollow.”**<sup>26</sup> Finally, it is worth noting that the word Timbuktu entered the English lexical field to mean, according to the Oxford dictionary, ‘a place that is very far’<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Abderrahman Es Sa'di, Op. Cit.,p.35

<sup>25</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timbuktu>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., same page

<sup>27</sup> Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 7th Edition, p.1549

### 3. Foundation:

Djibril Niane states in *l'Histoire Generale de l'Afrique*: “**Vers 1100, Tomboctou fut fondée par les Touareg magcharen**”<sup>28</sup>. Boubou Hama, in his book “*Histoire des Songhay*”, gives more details about the foundation of Timbuktu. He argues that the city was founded around 1100 A.D. by a slave woman from the Berber tribe of the Imakcharen who lived near a well located in the present day Timbuktu. Her masters used to leave their luggage with her during their absence, and because the Touareg used to define locations in reference to the person or tribe living in, therefore the location was given the name of that slave (the place of Bouctou). Since then that location grew to become one of the major trade centres in the mediaeval times.

#### II. Timbuktu: a Major Trade Centre

Professor Salem Ould el Hadj, a historian from Timbuktu, states “**the earliest records of Timbuktu go back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century to a prosperous desert crossroads where salt, gold and slaves were exchanged.**”<sup>29</sup> It prospered by using the Sahara as a belt protection from invaders and a portal through which it could transport desirable goods from

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<sup>28</sup> Djibril Tamsir Niane, Histoire Générale de l'Afrique, Le Mali et la deuxième expansion Manden, l'Afrique du XIIe au XVIe Siècle, Vol, IV, UNESCO, 1985, p. 148

<sup>29</sup> A documentary produced by Dr Abdullah Hakim Quick, Edited by James Tayler, Directed by Munier Parker

the African interior to merchants on the Mediterranean coast. Trade caravans had carried central Africa's gold across the desert since the days of the Romans, but during the Middle Ages the volume skyrocketed a staggering two to three tons of gold traversed the Sahara each year. Towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Empire of Mali took over the ancient Empire of Ghana, and Timbuktu became the commercial heart of this new superpower.

Timbuktu was one of the world legendary cities deep in the Saharan desert in the Empire of Mali. It was a port on a sea of sand and grew thanks to trans Saharan trade, camels coming from the North brought dates, tobacco, salt, glass, jewelry and European manufactured goods. Salt which was considered the white gold of Timbuktu, was brought from Tawdeni and Taghazain the north in great slabs weighing 30 kg each on camels across the dessert to the town. The caravans returned to Timbuktu with between 4,000 and 5,000 tons of salt each year.<sup>30</sup>The mighty River Niger was the trading waterway of the Empire of Mali. Goods cross the Sahara desert on camels to be transferred to boats that journeyed up the River to Djenne. It is striking to know that salt was so valuable that was exchanged ounce for ounce for gold.

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<sup>30</sup>John Reader, Africa a Biography of the Continent, Penguin Books, London, 1998, p. 269

In addition to gold and salt, another commodity stood alone as the most prized of all, slaves from the African interior represented half of the value of the desert commercial traffic. South of the Sahara Arab merchants found a booming readymade slave market. For slavery had been an accepted institution in central Africa for centuries, tribes acquired slaves in raids and wars and their owners were often eager to sell them to Moslem merchants for European guns, gun powder and manufactured goods. Long processions of captives linked by chains and neck shackles dragged across the burning Sahara including women who were to become concubines and domestic servants in North Africa and the Middle East.

In the wake of Islam another commodity began to arrive with the caravans, books were soon been traded in the markets of Timbuktu. Merchants found a new indulgence for their leisure time, books greatly enhanced the status of their owners and gave the pious a deeper understanding of Islam. The profit of the book trade soon rivaled trade in gold, salt and slaves. Knowledge was highly respected in the Islamic world and those enjoying it owe to prestige and power with their professors and their prolific writings, Timbuktu was to become one of the most important learning centres. Ibn Battuta, the great Moroccan world traveller visited Timbuktu in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, he noted in his chronicles the piousness, tolerance, wisdom and justice of the inhabitants of

Timbuktu<sup>31</sup>. Thus, a great importance was given to knowledge and learning, by the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century; families in Timbuktu began to establish their private libraries, and to send their sons to scholarship. The latter was as much as trade to drive Timbuktu's reputation, scholars were avid in the pursuit of knowledge in every field. The medieval manuscripts written by Africans bear witness to a once flourishing trade in books.

### III. Timbuktu :a Centre of Knowledge

Timbuktu is rich in history and this contradicts a commonly held impression in the West that says: Sub-Saharan Africa has only oral and no written traditions. Before the discovery of America, Timbuktu was a thriving centre of learning with its university professors who were teaching mathematics, theology, philosophy and a variety of other topics. It is very important to mention the contribution of Mansa Musa to spread Islamic civilization in Timbuktu after his return from a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324<sup>32</sup>. The daily activity of the scholars in Timbuktu revolved around the three sites of knowledge: the Sankore University, the Jingarey Ber mosque and *masjid* Sidi Yahya.

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<sup>31</sup>ابن بطوطة، رحلة ابن بطوطة في غرائب الأمصار و عجائب الأسفار، دار الفكر، بيروت، 2009، ص.376

<sup>32</sup>Mahmud Ka'ati, Tarikh el Fettach, translation of O. Houdas and M. Delafosse, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Maisonneuve, Paris, 1981, p. 58

## 1. Sankore University

Islam by its very nature encourages people to read, the first revelation given to Prophet Mohamed PBUH was “*iqra*”, “read in the name of your Lord who has created”, Timbuktu destroys the myth that black African people were primitive and ignorant. It destroys the myth that literacy, science and progress were in the North and came to the south. The Sankore mosque was initially built by a rich woman during the reign of the Askias<sup>33</sup>. There existed at that time 11 or more universities in Timbuktu, but of course they were not universities in the way we think of them. They were small gathering of scholars with particular specialties. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Timbuktu was at its peak gathering students and scholars from all over Africa. The heart of Timbuktu’s intellectual power was Sankore University. The mosque which contains the university was established in 1325 when many of Europe’s fledgling universities were struggling to gain credibility during the Renaissance, Sankore had already established itself as one of the famous centres of learning. The 15<sup>th</sup> century Sankore mosque was Timbuktu’s intellectual backbone, it provided learning for more than 25,000 students and scholars, according to Henry Louis Gates, Professor at the University of Harvard, before Europe’s renaissance. Learners came from West and North Africa and the Middle East to

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<sup>33</sup> عبد القادر زبادية، مملكة سنغاي في عهد الأسقيين 1493 – 1591، الشركة الوطنية للنشر و التوزيع، 1971، ص.104

study Islamic law, theology and a range of secular subjects<sup>34</sup>. Michael Palin in his TV series “Sahara” reported that the Imam of Timbuktu has a collection of scientific texts that clearly show the planets circling the Sun. They date back hundreds of years... it is convincing evidence that the scholars of Timbuktu knew a lot more than their counterpart in Europe. In the fifteenth century in Timbuktu, mathematicians and astronomers knew about the rotation of the planets, about the details of the eclipse, and things that the Europeans had to wait for 150 almost 200 years to know, when Galileo and Copernicus came up with these same findings, and were given a very hard time for it. Es Saadi in his *Tarikh es Sudan* reports that one of his relatives needed to have an eye operation, and he went to Djenne and that was actually successful, they were performing cataract-eye operations, this shows the high level in science they reached.

In the fourteenth century the city of Timbuktu had more than one hundred and eighty Qur’anic schools for a population of 115,000 . Children were taught the Qur’an and the basics of Islam. Those who could afford studying at Sankore University undertook three further levels of study in Arabic, grammar, literature, Islamic law, sciences and commentaries on the Qur’an. Then, they attended oral and written exams, and degrees were awarded to the successful candidates in a special form of a turban which is worn around

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<sup>34</sup> In a documentary broadcasted on National Geographic

the head and the face making the form of Allah (in Arabic script). The candidate was then taken to *masjid* Sidi Yahya to meet a jury of scholars; he sits in the middle of the jury. They unexpectedly took the turban out of his head, and he won't be allowed to put it on again until he answers the questions of the Jury. They ask him seven questions about the Islamic law, if he answers the questions correctly, he can wear the turban again. Then they altogether go to Sankore University to celebrate the event in a big ceremony. Then, the successful students enter the community of wise men and imams.

The professors and graduates of Sankore were not only religious men , but also the ruling elite, law makers and judges. They governed every aspect of life and they lived among people. Laws and regulations were made according to the *Chariaa* by a *fatwa*. The latter is a religious decision that meets special needs in a special environment, for instance, when a decision had to be made about currency, how much should they charge for gold or should they tax goods, they would go to Timbuktu and ask the scholars for a *Fatwa*. When they wanted to decide between borderlines of empires, they would ask for a *Fatwa*. The scholars in Timbuktu were also known as peacemakers, whenever there was a problem in different parts of West Africa they would go to settle it. Timbuktu became a pinnacle of knowledge and a sort of a Supreme Justice, where the ultimate decisions could be made for the Kings. According to Constance Hilliard, Lecturer in

African History at the University of North Texas. “Timbuktu was very vibrant, very cosmopolitan, people from so many different cultures lived there and worked there together ...it was very multicultural”. It is a world heritage it does not belong to the people of Mali only, it is a very old learning centre, a historical city which has sites in danger of extinction, which are declared world heritage by the UNESCO.

## 2. The Jingarey Ber Mosque

The distinctive Jingarey Ber Mosque, and the Royal Palace Madougou<sup>35</sup> were built by the Andalusian architect Abu Is’haq Es-Sahili, during the reign of Kankamusa<sup>36</sup>, Ibn Khaldun used the term Mansa which, according to him, means Sultan<sup>37</sup>. The mosque has been run by the family of Abramani Assyuti for centuries. Islam is thought to have reached this region in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. A descendant of Assyuti’s family reports that “The Jingarey Ber mosque was built in 1325 by Kankan Mussa handed to us by our parents. This mosque has been standing here for 7 centuries.”<sup>38</sup>

## 3. Sidi Yahya Mosque

Sidi Yahya mosque was built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Sheikh Ibrahim Hamallah, from the famous Kunta clan. It is

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<sup>35</sup>Boubou Hama, Op., Cit., p.322

<sup>36</sup>عبد القادر زبادية، مملكة سنغاي في عهد الأسفيين 1493 – 1591، الشركة الوطنية للنشر و التوزيع، 1971، ص.104

<sup>37</sup>عبد الرحمن ابن خلدون، تاريخ ابن خلدون، الجزء السادس، دار الفكر، بيروت، 2000، ص.268

<sup>38</sup>A documentary produced by Dr Abdullah Hakim Quick, Edited by James Tayler, Directed by Munier Parker

said that he had dreamt that this *masjid* would be visited by a famous saint (*wali*). After he had finished building the mosque, he locked it for 40 years until Sidi Yahya Etdlissi came from Andalusia. At that point Sheikh Ibrahim realized that it was the fulfillment of the dream; and then opened the mosque which has been serving the inhabitants of Timbuktu since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and it represents one of the most important areas of prayer and learning in the city of Timbuktu.

#### **IV. Manuscripts**

In the past learned people would have extensive libraries burdened of manuscripts not only about theology, but also astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, physics and chemistry. All sciences were studied by the scholars of Timbuktu. Today the legacy of that scholarship lies in a vast scattered collection of historical manuscripts.

Manuscripts in Timbuktu are, like in other parts of Africa, primarily the property of individual families which consider their collection of manuscripts to be part of their inheritance, their material wellbeing, and their wealth as well. They are reluctant to any collaboration with any individual or institution to improve the condition in which they are conserved. This attitude hampered, to a large extent the efforts aiming at changing the current appalling situation in which manuscripts are kept up.

The idea of preserving the manuscripts came after a warning from scholars, particularly from Timbuktu that the manuscripts are worn out, and that they are undergoing severe damages because of principally the bad conditions in which they are conserved. They were kept in wooden crates, metal boxes and skin bags exposed to rain, fire and termites. This situation is summarized in the following statement by the present day Timbuktu's imam Ali Imam Ben Essayuti, who has bought several manuscripts from locals to preserve them. "Houses collapse in the rain. The termites eat them. People borrow them and never bring them back."<sup>39</sup> This situation triggered a number of initiatives, on behalf of governmental and nongovernmental organisations, to preserve what remains of these manuscripts.

According to Jean Paul Mbelek, Professor of astronomy at the University of Pierre et Marie Curie, Paris VI, between 60 to 80 percent of the manuscripts are written in Arabic; the remaining manuscripts are written in local languages such as Bambara, Peul, Songhay, Mande, Fullani, Hawsa and a few in Tamasheq but in Arabic scripts. Arabic was dominant, it was considered the Lingua Franca of the regime at that time. In other words, Arabic in the empire of Mali was as important as Latin in Europe in the Middle Ages. It spread in Africa at the wake of Islam just as Christianity

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<sup>39</sup><http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1924486,00.html#ixzz2NAcXBxFD>

spread Latin in Europe, so it is for good reasons that historians call Arabic the Latin of Africa. Most of manuscripts were written in Timbuktu, and only some were imported from North Africa, and from Andalusia at the time of the Moorish presence in the Iberian Peninsula. This shows that there were cultural contacts between Timbuktu and Spain which served as a linking point between the former and the rest of Europe. Hence, Timbuktu was an important part of the world intellectual at that time. Thanks to the Moors<sup>40</sup>, the Islamic world was more developed than Europe during the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Timbuktu gained renown as a storehouse of advanced written knowledge, scholars wrote and studied manuscripts ranging from theological to secular topics. Only a small number of these medieval manuscripts are saved in Timbuktu, but for the Islamic scholar and Chief of the **Timbuktu Cultural Mission**, Ali Ould Sidi and other Africans, most of these manuscripts are so valuable, for instance, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century astronomers were studying the stars and prescribing medicine from plants to cure some diseases, their value is incalculable **“It is a treasure, and it is also a proof showing that the Africans had a past not only, an oral tradition but also writing sources.”**<sup>41</sup>Ali Ould Sidi, reveals

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<sup>40</sup>The Moors are known by mistake as the Arabs who are actually only a minority among the Moors. The majority of the Moors are Berbers and black Africans. When they conquered the Iberian Peninsula their leader Tarik Ibn Zyad, who is a Berber, called for help from the Ancient Empire of Ghana.

<sup>41</sup>A documentary, produced and directed by Richard Trayler-Smith, presented by Aminata Forna, BBC4, 2008.

that a manuscript dealing with algebra, mathematics was taken to France to be examined after being translated into French. They found that it contains the same programme taught for second year students at a university in France, while the same programme had been taught at the University of Sankore by the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>42</sup>.

Sheikh Ahmed Baba was one of prominent scholars in Timbuktu, he had one of the largest Libraries. He was deported to Morocco after the invasion of the empire of Songhay by the army of Al-Mansur under the command of Judar *Pasha* during the reign of *Askia* Is'haq in 1591<sup>43</sup>, he spent many years in captivity but he never forgot his home in Timbuktu and his responsibility to knowledge. Although many of his books were taken to Morocco, his legacy in Timbuktu still exists as a documentation centre set up in 1967 by UNESCO. It houses 120,000 manuscripts, and has become the focal point of the revival and documentation of the manuscripts of Timbuktu. The Ahmed Baba collection has some 40,000 manuscripts, Arabic was used for theological as well as secular works testament to the Islamic world's leadership during that period in medicine and sciences.

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<sup>42</sup>A documentary produced by Dr Abdullah Hakim Quick, Edited by James Tayler, Directed by Munier Parker

<sup>43</sup> J.D.Fage, A History of Africa, Hutchinson University Library for Africa, London, 1978, p. 180

The library of Mohammad Baghyogo<sup>44</sup> contains rich collections dealing with a variety of topics among which; prophetic sayings, Islamic Jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, exegesis, literary expression and medicine.

Other private libraries however, take great pride of the works they have, and make considerable efforts to maintain them. The Mahmud Ka'ati collection based upon the connection between Andalusia in Spain and West Africa, whereby the great grandfather of this family migrated from Andalusia to Timbuktu in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and married the daughter of Muhamad Touré the great leader of the Songhay empire. Their son Mahmud Ka'ati became a great scholars, and author of the famous *Tarikh el Fettach*. The collection of this library is now available to the public, the family has come together and gathered their works, and they are showing it to the public as one of the most important and unique collections of Arabic manuscripts in the city<sup>45</sup>. Mrs I. Haidara who runs the library declared that the collection is open to the public, it includes works on: Islam, Arabic, science, mathematics, metaphysics, history, logic, and many other disciplines is open to the public.

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<sup>44</sup> Mohammad ben Mahmud ben Abi Bakr el Jennaoui al Timbukti al Wangari originated from Wangara. According to Delafosse: the Peul, the Songhay and the Hawsa people give this name to the Mandine people.

<sup>45</sup>A documentary produced by Dr Abdullah Hakim Quick, Edited by James Tayler, Directed by Munier Parker

Mama Haidara was one of the famous collectors of manuscripts in the area of Timbuktu. He left a heavy responsibility to his son Abdulkadir, who since the death of his father has been able to collect over 12,000 documents for the Ahmed Baba Centre and then established his own Memorial Library for his father and the previous generations. Some manuscripts date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and they are of great value. “Most importantly, they preserve our heritage and connect us with the history of our forefathers”<sup>46</sup>, he reported.

The private library of Sheikh Muhammad Taha, a prominent scholar who had begun his study in Arawan before he moved to Timbuktu, houses some valuable manuscripts in different disciplines. Some of them are not taken care of properly, they are stored in big metallic boxes exposed to insects, particularly, termites, therefore, very important works may be lost.

## **V. Preservation of Manuscripts**

The scholars’ warning about the endangered situation of the manuscripts has found a response among some governmental and nongovernmental organisations. On the arid southern reaches of the Saharan desert, in the Malian city of Timbuktu there is an extraordinary effort underway supported

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<sup>46</sup>A documentary, produced and directed by Richard Trayler-Smith, presented by Aminata Forna, BBC4, 2008.

by the Ford Foundation to preserve and restore more than 700.000 ancient manuscripts. These works of art are so beautiful, they bring you back to other time when the value of art and education was the most important thing and that what makes Timbuktu so special. According to John Butler-Adam (representative of the Ford Foundation in South Africa), there are hundreds of thousands of manuscripts and very few have been examined as a basis for starting the translation and preservation projects, but a good number of them have been quite severely damaged by insects, sand erosion or bad handling. A lot of families are reluctant to keep up their manuscripts so they are trying to keep them for themselves. Others have just stored the manuscripts in trunks and other inadequate elements.

The translation of the manuscripts is a real challenge; first, there are so many and therefore it is hard to determine how many of them can feasibly be restored to be translated. Secondly, the script used is an old Arabic script which is not the same as the contemporary script. Thirdly, the use of Arabic is very different than it is today, so very special people are needed to undertake the translation. Hence, highly qualified translators who understand the old Arabic script are necessary. So the challenges are many but the rewards are far greater.

In 2002, the South African President Thabo Mbeke visited the city of Timbuktu and was so impressed by

what he saw, that he decided to make the preservation of the manuscripts a presidential project. In his speech “I am an African”, Thabo Mbeke talked about making of the 21st century, the African Century. His words carried deep meanings “ **... but it is not only to the future we need to look, Africa’s past legacy speaks volumes for itself. The first university in the world as well as many inventions can be attributed to the pioneers of Africa. Timbuktu has its own chapter in the system**”. In this respect, the South African government launched a project to digitalise the manuscripts dealing with astronomy. They created this centre to collect and preserve them. So far only a few manuscripts of the Ahmed Baba institute have been restored and then placed in special conservation boxes to preserve them. Mbeke granted \$7.5 million aid to Ahmed Baba Institute, aiming that the manuscripts will play a role in African Renaissance. By restoring the legacy of Ahmed Baba not only will Timbuktu or Mali benefit but the whole of Africa and the world can come and consult the wisdom found in these thousands of manuscripts.

Likewise many private libraries in Timbuktu are supported by grants from Europeans and Arab governments, perhaps the largest and best known is the Mama Haidara Library where thousands of manuscripts have been restored thanks to generous funding from Dubai.

In addition, a project to digitalise about 50,000 manuscripts say 4 million pages financed by the region of Rhone Alpes in France has recently been launched. The team has just started working and once it is finished and listed it will be made available for researchers and scholars. The revelation of this knowledge can counteract the prevailing discriminatory idea that the Africans had no written history<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup>Ford Foundation, 477 Madison Av., New York, USA

## **Conclusion**

Exploring the history of the city of Timbuktu has reveals impressive facts that are sometimes hard to believe in spite of the reliable sources. The importance of Timbuktu as a major trade centre through which two thirds of world's gold passed, in addition to its importance as a paramount centre of learning and knowledge provide convincing evidence that the Africans were once world leaders in science and knowledge. There is a local proverb that describes this situation, it says, "Timbuktu was out in front, in terms of culture, suddenly God told everyone to turn around, so Timbuktu ended up down at the back \_ as soon as God says to turn around again- Timbuktu will be out front again". There is a Sudanese proverb which shows the importance of Timbuktu as a land of knowledge and wisdom, that says "Salt comes from the north, gold comes from the south and money from the land of the whites, but God's words, knowledge and lovely stories come only from Timbuktu". The cultural and scientific legacy left by the scholars of Timbuktu in Mediaeval times is a response to the idea that prevailed in Europe by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Africans were primitive, ignorant and uncivilized peoples and that it was the duty of the Europeans to civilize them.

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