

Our Timbuktu, a rich African heritage

In November 2001 President Mbeki visited Timbuktu and saw the state in which vast manuscript collections from ancient Timbuktu in Mali were being kept. He promised Mali to help preserve this major African intellectual treasure. Immediately thereafter a team went up to Mali from the Department of Arts and Culture to undertake studies of the needs of the libraries and how South Africa could assist in the preservation of this legacy.

Conservation training of archivists was the first activity and since 2004 teams of young conservators from Timbuktu and South Africa have gone for training at the national archives while specialists go for training at the Ahmed Baba Centre in Timbuktu. There is also a programme at the University of Cape Town to study the contents of the manuscripts and it has been covering particularly legal materials but will also begin to look at some science, particularly astronomy, materials.

The most significant aspect of the SA-Mali project is the construction of a new library. A team of building specialists and architects based in Cape Town have been working with their Malian counterparts on the design and other technical aspects of a library which will become a modern archive, library, exhibition space, and yet fit in with the architectural style of the region. Funds to achieve this have been raised from various sectors of South African society. Building work is due to begin any moment. These activities

are impressive examples of pan-African exchange and cooperation.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES TO TIMBUKTU

Africa has falsely been represented as only or largely a continent of oral communication, as devoid of the practices of reading and writing. We have to reclaim our African heritage of reading and writing and therefore the heritage of Timbuktu is ours. That the manuscripts are largely in the Arabic script, and deal with West African history, and many have religious content, should not make us any less interested and concerned with them as our common human and African heritage.

It is still widely believed that Timbuktu is not a real place but refers to an unreachable location. 'Going to Timbuktu' means going to a place so far away that it is unlikely to be reached. *The Oxford English Dictionary* still retains a definition of Timbuktu as such. However, it is a very real and significant part of African history.

The earliest recorded reference

to Timbuktu is in a European source, the *Catalan Atlas* of 1375, where the city, spelled Tenbuch, is correctly located in West Africa. This indicates that the city had attained significance outside Africa by the late 14th century.

In later centuries the city gained more recognition from scholars and travellers from Spain and elsewhere in Europe. In the early 16th century the scholar from Granada, al-Hasan bin Muhammad al-Wazz_n al-Zayy_t_, who was given the name Leo Africanus reached Timbuktu. He left a work in which he described his visit to the Songhay state and a number of the towns in the region including Jenne and Timbuktu. He remarked on, among other things, the value placed on books among Timbuktu's inhabitants.

The high-point of outsider concern with Timbuktu is during the 19th century when there were many attempts to reach the city. Throughout this period the town is cast as the most distant point in Africa and it becomes the sign of the 'mysteriousness' of the continent. A number of exploration missions were sent to 'discover' it

for Europe alongside all the other missions to penetrate the continent. The Scotsman Alexander Gordon Laing who arrived in Timbuktu in 1826 is considered the first European to reach it successfully but was killed on his return to Europe. The Frenchman Rene Caille followed in 1828.

The German-speaking Heinrich Barth undertook an exploration of West Africa for the British Africa Association and arrived in Timbuktu in 1853 residing there for between six to eight months. Under the protection of Shaykh Ahmad al-Bakkai, a leading scholar in the region, he wrote in greater detail than previous travellers about the cultures of the region. His detailed work about the peoples he encountered and the geography of his travels are a major source of western knowledge about Timbuktu and West Africa in the 19th century.

TIMBUKTU'S HISTORY

Timbuktu is situated on the bend of the great Niger River in West Africa and became famous as a city of commerce and scholarship. Historically, it has been a meeting place for caravans from across the Sahara desert to the North and river traffic coming from far in the South.

Given its location as a 'port' on the edges of the desert and the river it has always had a linguistically and ethnically mixed population. Tuareg clans, Arabs from various oases, Songhay, Soninke, Dyula, and Fulbe are notable among the range of groups that have made the city home as merchants, scholars and rulers. In the early 16th century it was viewed as a Songhay-speaking city, and Songhay remains the dominant language.

The local historian Al-Sa'd_ traced the origins of Timbuktu back to around 1100. In his *Tarikh al-Sudan* he claims that it was the



name of a slave woman who was the guardian of the first nomadic camp there. Another explanation is that *Buktu* is derived from the Tuareg root meaning 'to be distant or hidden' with the feminine possessive *Tin* prefixed.

The ruler of the Malian state of which Timbuktu was a part, *mansa* Musa, visited the city on his way back from pilgrimage to Mekka around 1325. With him was the Andalusian intellectual Abu Ishak Ibrahim al-Sahili. He designed a residence for the *mansa* as well as the *Dingere-Ber* or Great Mosque, which still stands and remains the main mosque of the city. The great North African traveller, Ibn Battuta, visited the city in the early 1350s when it was still under the rule of the Malian state. His impressions of the city at this time are important because there are few extant views of the city by visitors during this early period of its history.

Timbuktu was incorporated into the expanding Songhay state in 1468 and remained part of it until 1591. Under the Songhay ruler Askia Muhammad bin Abi Bakr, from 1493, and his descendants, scholars and scholarship benefited from the stability and respect shown them by the rulers. Whereas Gao, about 400km from Timbuktu, was the capital of the *Askiyas*, Timbuktu remained a kind of autonomous city of learning where students frequented the homes of scholars and congregated around

reputed masters of various fields in the mosques of the city. But this largely changed for the city in 1591 when the Sa'dian ruler of Morocco sent a force to attack and conquer the region. Many scholars left the city and others, such as the famous Ahmad Baba, were taken prisoner and sent to Marrakesh. Baba's library of manuscripts went with him.

With the departure of the Moroccan Sa'dian rulers the officers who were left to rule over the state engaged in internecine conflict. They were furthermore unable to defend their state and the city from incessant Tuareg assaults. Over time the descendants of the Sa'dian invaders came to constitute a distinctive social group in Timbuktu. The unstable situation after the decline of Sa'dian rule continued through the 17th and 18th centuries. A similar situation prevailed in the 19th century but with Fulbe dominance over the affairs of Timbuktu.

LIBRARIES OF TIMBUKTU

Given that so many manuscripts are being found in Timbuktu it would seem appropriate to talk of it as a vast archive. We do not yet know whether there were organised libraries for scholars and the public in general. But what is certain is that individual scholarly families housed their own private collections at, or close to, the main scholars from the family or lineage. Scholarship entailed reading a text with the master of a certain body of texts and then getting permission from the master to teach it. In the process copies would be reproduced by scribes, for students or scholars, who needed them.

Ahmad Baba Centre for Research and Documentation (CEDRAB) was created in Timbuktu in 1970 through a UNESCO initiative. The name of the town's most famous



Some of the Timbuktu manuscripts in Arabic scrips

scholar was invoked and given to the archive that would house all the manuscripts located in the town and the broader region. From 1977 a programme was embarked upon to buy manuscript collections hidden or long-forgotten among the possessions of families throughout the region. Many of these collections were bestowed as family endowments.

The strategy of going out and buying manuscripts for deposit in a specially created facility proved to be very effective and to date the library has a collection of around 20 000 manuscripts housed in its buildings. They date from the earliest periods of Timbuktu's intellectual flowering through to the 20th century. They reflect the whole range of areas of writing common among the scholars of the town and copies of materials from as far as afield as Nigeria.

The manuscripts are overwhelmingly in the Arabic script and language, which was the language of scholarship in much of Western Africa, the northern half of the continent and along the East African coast. It played a similar role to Latin in Europe. But there are works in Songhay, Fulfulde, Tamasheq and Hausa written in the Arabic script. The Arabic calligraphy adopted are in a range of styles which are specifically North west African.

In the 1990s a new phenomenon arose, that of private manuscript libraries. Because there are a number of families with large manuscript collections, a few of

these families decided to start their archives dedicated to preserving their own collections. There is now an association of private libraries with 24 participating libraries. Three families already have buildings housing their own collections: the Mamma Haidara, Ka'ti, and Wangari collections have spaces managed by members of their respective families. The Mamma Haidara library already has a catalogue enumerating its 5 000 items.

There is no way of knowing exactly how many manuscripts or individual collections exist in Timbuktu, the surrounding region and in other towns such as Gao and Jenne. What is certain, is that we are now discovering more and more materials with the greater African and international focus on the manuscripts.

Working to conserve and research the extraordinary richness and number of the Timbuktu manuscripts is a beginning, and in itself a lifetime's work.

CONTINENT OF RICH INTELLECTUAL ABILITIES

The vast archive of materials that remains in Timbuktu and in surrounding settlements is testimony to a history of scholarly endeavour that has been an integral part of African history since the development of writing on the continent. Other periods and spaces on the continent, Abyssinia for instance, also have rich histories of intellectual production and philosophical reflection. Preserving

its suppressed histories of writing and reading shows African peoples' capacities to express themselves in complex forms.

The wide diversity of Africa's language, and their poetic traditions, is a mark of African intellectual abilities. It is common to meet people in Timbuktu who work flawlessly with three to six languages. For example, Ali Farka Toure, the late great Malian guitarist from the Timbuktu region, sang in six languages in addition to speaking French. Similar multilingualism is the case elsewhere on the continent as well. It also reflects the openness of the continent's peoples to contact with the so-called wider world. Throughout the northern parts of the continent, across the Sahara, and along the whole of Sudanic Africa from Senegal to Ethiopia and down the East African coast we can find rich and copious examples of Africans engaged in reading and writing.

We have to begin to think continentally and embrace all of the continent's traditions and techniques of knowledge. To remake our continent we have to look back deeply and reclaim the many pasts that have been denied and hidden from us through the work of colonial racism and domination. This is the meaning of 'rebirth' or *renaissance*. 16

Shamil Jeppie is a lecturer in the Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town, and an advisor to the South-African Mali Project.