

Re/discovering Timbuktu

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In November 2001 President Thabo Mbeki travelled to the Republic of Mali on an official visit accompanied by a large South African delegation. Travelling statesmen, government officials and businessmen usually live very comfortably in respectable hotels and meet their counterparts in air-conditioned boardrooms in capital cities, then they head back home. Bamako, the capital of Mali, where the South Africans landed and held all their meetings, is a sprawling African city along the Niger River. It has its share of high-rise air-conditioned hotels with swimming pools where visitors with the right budgets can stay. It is a product of late nineteenth-century French colonial encroachment into the interior of West Africa. It had no significance before this.

There is nothing to show in the capital that the modern Malian state inherited successive traditions of state formation dating back centuries. There is certainly no evidence, on the surface at least, of Mali's older traditions of education, under the sharp sun and amidst the bustle of urban Bamako – the potholed and dusty streets filled with rusty, ageing vehicles, the occasional four-wheel drive, agile scooters, makeshift markets where everything is traded from imported bright fabrics and a variety of local textiles to animal fetishes, and improvised housing stretching out in all directions in seemingly unplanned fashion. If this is the physical experience of the city which hides and forgets older traditions of urban organisation, then there are also the limits of overstretched government educational and cultural budgets that inhibit the realisation for an ordinary visitor that Mali is also heir to an extensive tradition of indigenous scholarship.

Unfortunately for the South African delegation, the place where they may have found some faint reference to the earlier traditions of urban life, state-building and traditional learning was closed. The Musée National du Mali was undergoing renovation and its impressive local collections were stacked away; an attractive new building was in the last stages of completion. This would be a modern, western Sudanic-style structure – a mix of modernist minimalism and local forms and colour. The museum is located en route to the country's presidential palace which is perched high above the rest of the capital. It is a naturally elevated spot in the urban landscape with power inscribed in it

One has to go far from the capital city, to the historic centres of learning to the north – to Jenne and Ségou, to Timbuktu and Gao – to witness more clearly the residues and vestiges of 'pre-modern' styles of schooling. There one can easily stumble upon children sitting around teachers under trees in the sand, or reading under a street lamp at night, or catch the cacophony of noise as groups of boys or girls practise their lessons prescribed for memorisation.

since the official residence of the president is there and one has to literally look up to it. Maybe this then is all that remains from earlier forms of statehood, a special space symbolising authority.

One has to hang around in Bamako for a long time and befriend those with local knowledge to get introductions to students and marabouts¹ who still practise and value those older conventions of reading, writing and memorisation. These marabouts may also be specialised in the more esoteric arts of numerology and geomancy, and engage in some healing with this knowledge. They may also be leading members within Sufi orders. One can still find the instruments of this kind of learning in the city's main market – printed copies of classics used for centuries but in handwritten form; clean wooden slates for writing down lessons; and vast numbers of *tasbihs* or rosaries, some beautifully crafted from local woods, others made of plastic, possibly in China. These are not meant specifically for students but marabouts and pious students will certainly be in possession of them and use them daily in the prescribed fashion.

'Traditional' learning has, of course, not been passed on unchanged and without ongoing negotiations between parties with divergent interpretations of that legacy. The French came and imposed their language and secular education in the course of the twentieth century. Some local elites took to this; others took to it while maintaining one foot in the more traditional Arabic Islamic schools. The French also created their own *médresa* which attempted to combine the teaching of Arabic and French but under their supervision and control. Then from the years just before independence in 1960 there were steadily growing numbers of young intellectuals who came back from the Middle East with new ideas of what local education should look like.² The contestations over learning and the most appropriate way of life for Malians are not readily transparent. One has to go far away from the capital city, to the historic centres of learning to the north – to Jenne and Ségou, to Timbuktu and Gao – to witness more clearly the residues and vestiges of those 'pre-modern' styles of schooling and how to become an educated man or woman. There one could easily stumble upon children sitting around teachers under trees in the sand, or reading under a street lamp at night, or gathering in the homes of teachers from after sunrise, writing lessons on wooden slates, or catch the cacophony of noise as groups of boys or girls practise their lessons prescribed for memorisation. Timbuktu is still alive with a whole range of educational activities with origins in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial ideas and planning.

For a president to take his delegation to Timbuktu, some 750 kilometres from the capital, is rather unusual. Indeed, given that 'going to Timbuktu' means in so many languages to go to an unreachable or extremely distant location, and still has currency as a figure of speech, putting that destination down on the official itinerary may have appeared as a belated April Fool's joke on the part of the Presidency. From the perspective of urban Mali, from Bamako in other words, Timbuktu is a dust-covered and unexciting backwater. You pick this up in the blank looks and responses of people you

meet in Bamako when you say you're on your way to Timbuktu. You can get transported there but never with impressive efficiency or undiluted enthusiasm. Nobody in Bamako tells you it's a great place to visit with interesting monuments and rare artefacts. To get to Timbuktu is indeed a tedious trek. There are two scheduled flights per week on small aircraft – as well as an exotic airline offering the service – otherwise you travel overland for two days in ancient but resilient Landcruisers over some really rough terrain. There is no conventional road connecting Timbuktu with any other major town. There's also the longer river option, of course, which can take anything from two to five days depending on the season and where the boat leaves from. So, you have to be an authentic adventure traveller, keen on the human and geographical diversity of the continent, or a researcher – say an anthropologist concerned with nomads or a historian working with African Arabic writings – on a fieldwork trip if you go there these days. Or, you can be the president of South Africa.

The South African president was accompanied by the then president of Mali, Alpha Oumar Konaré, who is now a senior statesman in the African Union based in Addis Ababa. Konaré was Mali's first democratically elected president from 1992 onward, after a long period of dictatorial rule over the country by Lieutenant-General Mousa Traoré who seized power in 1968. Konaré is a historian and archaeologist by training and a former minister of culture. The then first lady, Madame Adamé Ba Konaré, is also a historian. With two history PhDs occupying the hill in Bamako, the subject of history when meeting Mbeki would always be on the agenda. Their invitation to the South African delegation to make a trip to the historically significant town of Timbuktu was therefore to be expected. As historians serving in the higher education institutes of Bamako in the 1970s, they had been concerned with the pre-colonial history of Mali – with the states and societies which were located in and just beyond the space that the nation state now stretches across. For them, Timbuktu is a repository of history, a living archive which anybody with a concern for African history should be acquainted with. Timbuktu may be hard to get to but it played an essential role as a centre of scholarship under the Songhay state until the invasion from the rulers of Marrakesh in 1591, and even thereafter it was revived.³ In its previous incarnations then, Timbuktu was a centre of trade and scholarship, a magnet to people from far and wide coming to exchange goods and ideas. Furthermore, in this dusty settlement – which young people with computer skills and knowledge of French now want to leave for the employment possibilities and energy of Bamako – there was a lively circuit of writers and their audiences, of visiting traders and sometimes diplomats and travellers from the remote corners of the Mediterranean world, long before Bamako was founded. The capital may now be the regional magnet by virtue of being the national capital but Timbuktu definitely played that role in a previous period of the vast region's history.

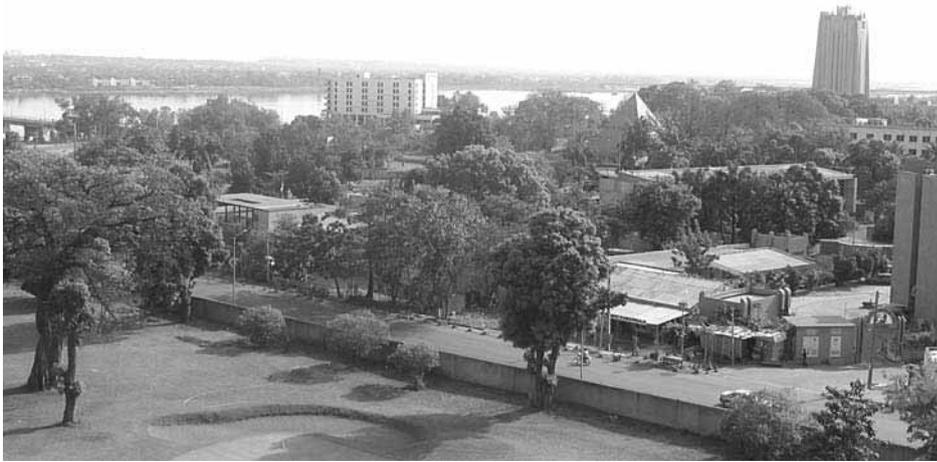
Timbuktu remains off the beaten track and any trip there for an outsider is a kind of trek from the centre to the margins of the state. But the Malian president saw the entirety of the land as his concern. The official Timbuktu Region, numbered seven in the country's

administrative layout, was especially in need of central government attention. There had been increasing hardship followed by unrest during and after the droughts of the 1970s – when the term ‘Sahel’ came to be synonymous with arid and barren landscapes and human hardship – which transformed local communities there. Then in 1990 a sustained rebellion began that lasted until 1996 when, under the Konaré administration, a civil accord was signed leading to peace in the region. There had been a sense among large sections of the population living in that vast terrain sharing borders with Algeria and Mauritania that it was purposely neglected. The rebellions of the 1990s took the form of a regional ethnic/linguistic Tamasheq and Moor ‘nationalism’.⁴ Timbuktu was on the margins of this conflict but it did reach the town too. This otherwise sleepy settlement was the site of protest marches and political unrest. But a peace accord had been signed and a monument to peace constructed on the northern edge of the town. The inhabitants of Timbuktu, who had only recently again become used to tourists, were rather unused to the level of the South Africa state visit so the whole town was focused on the appearance of the South African head of state. This was also, of course, the first visit to Timbuktu by President Mbeki and his large delegation.

South African media has historically been, and remains, more intimately linked to the dominant northern sources of information; and apartheid education and politics kept the population cut off from the rest of the continent. London and Amsterdam, Paris and Hamburg, Tel Aviv and New York were seen as more important points of political and cultural connection. The vast land mass north of the country’s border was a large fly-over zone to be missed and dismissed. Nothing of aesthetic value had come from there; there were no great works of art and literature, it was asserted or implied. Since 1994, part of the continuing post-apartheid struggle has been to reorient the attention of the media and of intellectuals, and to steer education and cultural institutions to look with greater interest and concern to the continent (and other parts of the global south) as a location for collaborative possibilities and not as a miserable space to pass over.

Understandably, not many heads of state, even from the continent itself, take the time to go to Timbuktu even when they are in Mali. The Brother Leader Muammar Gaddafi has gone, of course, and pitched his tent there. After Mbeki’s visit there were rumours of the German then the French presidents planning visits; indeed, other statesmen landed there too.

The town has attracted numerous other visitors of note since at least the time of Ibn Battuta, the great North African globetrotter who arrived there in 1353.⁵ He left his native land across the Sahara and travelled for many years through parts of Africa and went as far as China. Timbuktu has become a destination for travellers like Ibn Battuta: those who incessantly travel and explore and are animated by the search for fresh human experiences and challenges; those who will go to the ends of the earth to find something new and try to learn from those they encounter there; those who simply take pleasure in the journey itself and in the experiences along the way. There are many other



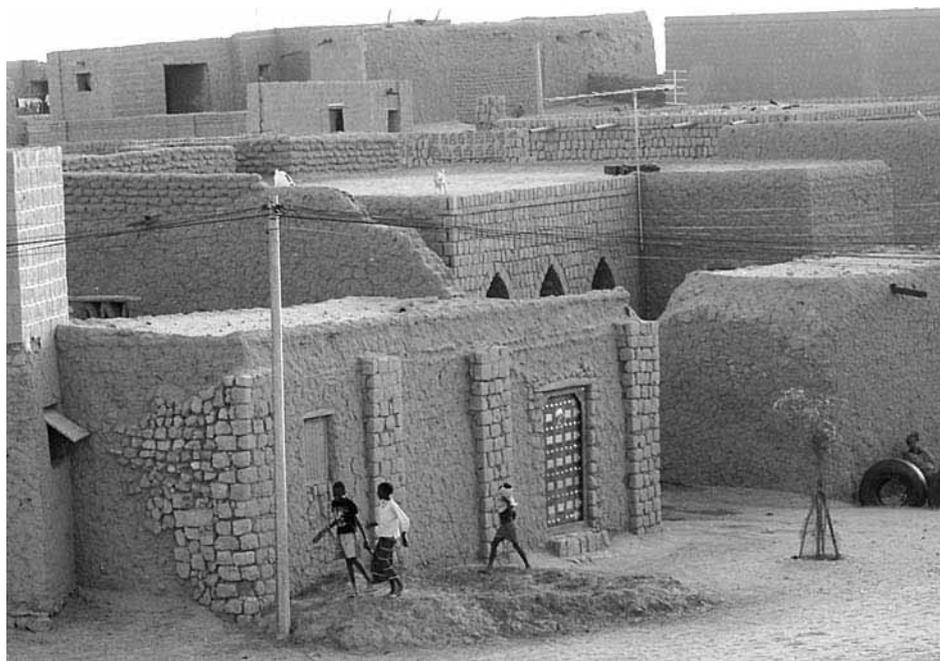
The bustling modern city of Bamako, capital of Mali, gives little hint of the treasures of the country's ancient heritage.

well-known travellers who arrived in Timbuktu and left behind impressions of the town. There was the Andalusian émigré, writer and diplomat al-Hasan al-Wazzan (Leo Africanus), who went there on a diplomatic mission for the sultan of Fez in 1526.⁶ Despite the mythic status that Timbuktu achieved by the sixteenth century through Portuguese and English imaginings of a location with immense wealth deep inside Africa, the European explorers did not reach that illusive place until the nineteenth century. They competed to arrive there first and some like Heinrich Barth, who reached there in 1853, produced important observations on the town and many of the people he encountered along the way.⁷

So President Mbeki's arrival in Timbuktu at the start of the new millennium was as part of a long line of travellers led there by its now near mythic status. For many, imaginary gold was the force attracting them; for others it was the availability of books and savants. Some had the noble intentions of learning and communicating with those whom they met there; others were intent on producing images to feed the appetites of conquerors. There were the cosmopolitan travellers prepared to share and discover and then there were the colonising surveyors, writing to inform their sponsors in the industrial capitals of the north.

There is much to learn in that old city of mud brick buildings on the edge of the desert. The fact that various communities had been living there for centuries and managed to establish a growing settlement is in itself a cause to engage with its inhabitants. But it had also become over the centuries a renowned centre of learning in north-west Africa and was also known in learned circles in Cairo and Mecca. The town as an emblem for a regional centre of reading and writing was remarked upon by various travellers from the time of Ibn Battuta. Barth settled there for a while and engaged with local scholars. Timbuktu was always a distant place even in its own regional setting yet it was linked by trade and scholarship to other locations in the region. Salt, slaves, gold and other goods were exchanged. But so were books. Expert readers and writers, paper and copyists, books – originals and copies – were circulated between Timbuktu and its regional counterparts.

The mud brick buildings of Timbuktu, built on foundations many centuries old.



It was during his 2001 visit that the South African president was introduced to the manuscript collections at the Ahmed Baba Institute. A confusing web of buildings set around what must have been planned as a courtyard is located off the main thoroughfare into the centre of town. These buildings hold the most significant traces of the scholarly world of which Timbuktu was once a part. It is very easy to overlook them and even on entering them there is nothing to lure the visitor in, to seduce you to stay on and linger over the paper and ink, the crafted leather bindings and other remains from the past. The exhibition space consists of two small tables with glass cases filled with texts, none of which is wholly visible because there is too little space so they lie on top of each other in the cases. On top of them are slips of modern white typed paper describing the respective texts – titles, authors, dates and so on. This exhibition is like an afterthought, yet what is on display is stunning. These texts are mere snippets of the wealth of material available in this institute. The items are beautiful and important documents of a living intellectual past but far too little attention has been given to the methods of their presentation. No wonder most visitors to Timbuktu and most guidebooks appear not to capture the importance of what the institute stands for.

This institute was founded on the recommendation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) in 1970 to collect and conserve the written heritage of the region. It was born during a period of great excitement about the possibilities of writing a new kind of African history and using newly uncovered sources from Africa itself to write this history – written and oral sources were to be collected and made available to the new generation of African historians.⁸ President Mbeki – like other African intellectuals and leading figures of resistance of his generation – has always had

a keen interest in African and world history and had of course known of the legacy of Timbuktu. But the impressive manuscripts that remain as traces of a long, complex and fascinating intellectual tradition in Timbuktu were a revelation to the South African president. This, and the larger African written heritage, still remains relatively unknown except to a rather small group of scholars and professionals concerned with matters of conservation and libraries in Africa. Some of the leading scholars concerned with this heritage are represented in this volume. On the continent itself, except in the communities where these manuscripts were produced and still circulate, there is much ignorance about the pre-European traditions of reading and writing.

The media paid little attention to the president's 2001 Malian trip. The fact that he went to Timbuktu was even less noteworthy. As a result, it is almost impossible to find press images of the trip or of the president pressed into the little exhibition room, poring over the glass cabinets and listening to translated explanations about their content and authorship. There is precious little visual coverage of this inaugural South African visit to Timbuktu. Is this a sign of the significance that the media gave either to Mali, a distant and poor African country, or to Timbuktu, that mythical place that was not supposed to exist? But since then, there has been notable change in the coverage. This happened because it became impossible to ignore the announcements and fund-raising activities of the South Africa–Mali Project in its efforts to build a new archive in Timbuktu.

President Mbeki promised his Malian counterpart that his government would assist the government of Mali to conserve the thousands of manuscripts held in Timbuktu at the Ahmed Baba Institute. The number of manuscript items is large – running into 20 000 items – but the storage and conservation facilities and the human capacities to conserve them for posterity were questionable. The tiny exhibition room had a semblance of order, but a room meant to be the conservation studio was in disarray and disuse and equipment looked rusty and outdated.

Timbuktu is far from the capital and the central state has many pressing priorities to address; texts largely from another era of scholarship come far down the line on the list of the state's financial priorities. The choice appeared to be between clean water and sanitation and investing in the conservation and display of thousands of old, dusty books. This much Konaré told the South African president. The central government, however, had been stretching its own resources to at least keep the basic functions of the archive in Timbuktu – there was electricity, a measure of security for the archive, and a rudimentary management structure. Bamako had also been facilitating outside assistance, from a few donor agencies in Europe and the United States, to keep the institute in Timbuktu afloat. A growing number of collections in the hands of various families had also come to light and individual attempts have been made by representatives of these families to conserve their family heritage (see the chapters in this collection by representatives of various private libraries).

In its previous incarnations, the dusty settlement of Timbuktu was a centre of trade and scholarship, a magnet to people from far and wide coming to exchange goods and ideas. For many, imaginary gold was the force attracting them; for others it was the availability of books and savants. Some had the noble intentions of learning and communicating with those whom they met there; others were intent on producing images to feed the appetites of conquerors. There were the cosmopolitan travellers prepared to share and discover and then there were the colonising surveyors, writing to inform their sponsors in the industrial capitals of the north.



Timbuktu is located where the Niger flows north into the southern edge of the desert, making the town a place where 'camel meets canoe'. From at least as early as the eleventh century, Timbuktu has been an important port for trade between West and North Africa.

However, there was clearly a need for more resources and skills development. In terms of contemporary standards of conservation there was a huge and growing gap between what was required as the ageing paper record deteriorated, and the very little that was being done to protect this precious legacy.

The promise of assistance from the southern tip of Africa to a Sahelian town at the bend of the great Niger River was an expression of the commitment to what Mbeki has called 'the African Renaissance'. In 1996 he gave his famous 'I am an African' speech while he was still deputy-president. In 1998 he convened a conference with a range of South African intellectuals on the subject of the 'renaissance' of Africa. He was aware of the challenges facing the continent but solutions could not be proposed or implemented without the simultaneous reclamation of a complex 'African identity' and the resolve to act as Africans in the interests of the continent.⁹ Despite all the crucial challenges, the continent is not a lost cause and the possibilities that exist to transform it from within have to be harnessed. This is in direct opposition to the so-called 'Afro-pessimist' case, which asserts that the continent is on an ever-downward path of economic and political decay. Mbeki's argument is that the revival of the continent is clearly necessary and this is not possible without Africans engaging in regional and continent-wide coordination and exchanges to transform their conditions. The intellectual and cultural exchanges are as important as the political and economic collaboration needed to strengthen African capacities. It was out of this commitment to a vision of renewal on the continent that a South African project on the Malian manuscript heritage was initiated. This project began immediately after the president's return from Mali when a delegation from the Department of Arts and Culture was sent to make an assessment of the archival, conservation and research situation at the Ahmed Baba Institute, then known as Cedrab (Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmed Baba), later renamed IHERI-AB (Institut des Hautes Etudes et de Recherche Islamique – Ahmed Baba) in 2001.

A 'technical team' – as the bureaucratic language would have it – of professionals constituted by the Department of Arts and Culture left for Mali in early December 2001, two weeks after the presidential trip. Their purpose was to advise the Presidency and the minister of arts and culture on what, in practical terms, needed to be done in

Timbuktu and what South Africa could offer. They went to meet with their counterparts in the capital and investigate the state of the facilities at Cedrab in Timbuktu.¹⁰ Beyond the presidential gesture, this team had to work out the finer details of any future project in the town. South Africa then still had no official representation in Bamako – an embassy would be opened only in 2004 – and so the team had no official welcome, no vehicles, no hotel, nothing. In those days trips from South Africa to Mali went via Paris, so it was a very weary group of South Africans that arrived in Bamako via Paris late at night. They waited about at Senufo airport for a welcoming Malian official but ended up having to negotiate the cost of a ride into town with local taxi drivers and decide on a hotel. Malian officials had no idea that the South Africans were sending a team so soon after the Mbeki visit.

The next day they went from ministry to ministry, announcing themselves, until they found that the relevant ministry was education, not the Malian national department of culture. Officials there looked suspiciously at this band of awkward South Africans who informed them that they were there in response to Mbeki's promise of assistance. For this team the whole trip – from arrival in Bamako, through the two-day road trip to Timbuktu (accompanied by two sullen *gendarmes* from some point before Douenza), the time in Timbuktu and the flight back on the morning when the locals were to celebrate the end of the month of Ramadan – fell into the 'adventure travel' category rather than the hassle-free diplomatic kind their colleagues had experienced two weeks earlier. It was a rediscovery of Timbuktu the hard way; more like backpacking student travellers on a low budget than officials used to air-conditioned boardrooms and chartered jets.

The team's recommendations remained filled with passion despite the bureaucratic prose advising on what was to be done. Many trips followed, long meetings were held to work out details, and reports were submitted urging urgent measures. Finally work began in Mali. The conservation studio was brought back to life as Cedrab nominated young men to go for training at the National Archives of South Africa, which would be the engine room of the project. Training also took place at the institute itself when South African trainers went annually on two-week training stints to Timbuktu. 'Conservation' became an exciting field among a section of Timbuktu's young people. A 'building team' was constituted in South Africa and a design was developed, together with Malian experts, for a new archival centre in the town. Later on, access was provided to digital copies of manuscripts selected from the existing catalogues. The minister in the Presidency, Essop Pahad, cracked the whip to keep the whole multifaceted project focused and in line and, importantly, to get South Africans with deep pockets to give generously to this initiative. In Timbuktu itself, the idea of welcoming South Africans had moved beyond the event of a major presidential visit to welcoming all kinds of South Africans from various backgrounds – first those associated with the project, then others who had learned about Timbuktu and the logistics of getting there because of growing publicity evoked by the project. The linguistically gifted young touts who

awaited new tourist arrivals in the town soon picked up Afrikaans, Xhosa and other South African words and expressions from these new visitors – so making it easier to sell them their wares.

Ahmad Baba (1556–1627), the venerable son of the soil, became a frequently invoked name as those associated with the project came to learn more about the rich materials deposited in the archives founded in his name, and promoted this newest effort to conserve an African heritage and see it listed on the Unesco ‘memory of the world’ register of humankind’s most significant documentary heritage.¹¹ Baba was prolific, authoring more than 50 works. We know of 23 titles that are still accessible. His *Nayl al-ibtihaj bi-tatiriz al-dibaj* is a biographical dictionary of the leading scholars of his time.¹² It lists around 800 scholars, including his teacher Muhammad al-Wangari Baghayoho. Baba left a strong intellectual imprint in Timbuktu and his legacy is still remembered, thus the recurrent references to him. There are numerous copies of his works in Timbuktu and beyond.¹³

Just as Baba’s name was frequently cited as the premier example of local scholarship, so the word ‘manuscript’ came to hold magical qualities as if it were in itself something extraordinary.¹⁴ At times there were the usual overstatements and mis-descriptions in the media, such as referring to the collections as ‘ancient scrolls’ or as holding ‘the secrets’ to ‘the African past’ – as if the putative ‘secrets’ would solve our problems or there was one Africa with a single past. This was especially the case with references to the still unstudied astronomy and astrology texts and items of a numerological nature in the archives. In a time of ‘new age’ searching for alternatives to consumerism and materialism it has ironically become easy to in turn commodify other people’s ways of living – their ideas, values and practices, whether from the Andes, Timbuktu, the Karoo or Tibet – and such finds were useful materials to turn into products to sell. Fortunately, it appears that not too much of this kind of ‘new age’ usage of the Timbuktu heritage has so far occurred. But the overstatements and ideas of ‘secrets’ from Timbuktu were, in some way, part of the feverish excitement of discovery, of unearthing an African written tradition to set beside the oral tradition always invoked as an expression of African historical memory. It was yet another reflection of a country coming in from the cold and discovering a culturally rich and diverse continent far beyond its borders.

The manuscripts have also been described as ‘ancient’, which they are in the sense that many of them were produced many generations ago, hundreds of years back, but not meaning that they go back to before, say, AD 900 or 1200. Indeed, the earliest item shown to various teams of visitors was a Qur’an dating back to the thirteenth century. These ‘ancient’ materials are mostly in such a fragile state that handling them – for conservation or digitisation, for instance – has been out of the question. Materials for digitisation and research have had to be limited to those items from more recent periods – the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and through the colonial twentieth century.

Dating the manuscripts and attribution of authorship have been major challenges of the research project at the University of Cape Town (called the *Tombouctou* Manuscript Project), for it would appear that many authors were not in the habit of dating their works and neither were many of them keen to sign them. This absence of information on authorship, provenance and date of composition for so many of the manuscripts so far studied is most probably linked to the esoteric world in which the scholars produced their work. Historians such as Louis Brenner have noted the deep Sufi or mystical roots of the pre-colonial style of education in which individuality, personal worldly achievement and recognition were not of any significance. A scholar was simply a vehicle for conveying already established knowledge and esoteric learning, irrespective of the subject. The source of knowledge was not the individual writer but went beyond him to the divine, to God.¹⁵ While this argument is plausible given the widespread influence of various bodies of Sufi ideas in the region, the question still requires further study. Some of the manuscripts contain debates and individual opinions, especially the legal materials. There is also criticism and personal invective within the scholarly community. So a quasi-idyllic esoteric consensus among writers was not the norm. It remains to be studied whether in certain fields of writing there was greater effort to 'hide' the identity of an author, whereas in others an author had to assert his identity, and if over time there was a greater movement from anonymity to declaration of an authorial role. It does, however, seem clear that the idea of the autonomous creative agent was not known there (in Europe it had been a construct since early modern times and not an essential attribute of scholarship), but neither was all literary output the product of a 'culture of anonymous writing'.¹⁶ A similar set of issues is involved in the question of copying and collecting of manuscripts, for a writer-copyist-collector complex constituted the 'scribal culture' of Timbuktu.

The officials of the Ahmed Baba Institute and Abdel Kader Haidara, in charge of his family's collection of manuscripts and more recently the coordinator of a consortium of similar private libraries, have been particularly generous and forthcoming in their collaboration, facilitating research and study of the wide array of materials held in the archives. There are only two sets of catalogues available as research aids and while they have been most useful as a starting point, they are not without their limitations and problems.¹⁷ They do not cover the whole corpus of materials held at either the Ahmed Baba or the Haidara archive, and often the catalogue descriptions of items are either incomplete or misleading. They also suffer from the general problems identified above, that is, gaps in attribution and dating. The experience of looking at piles and piles of manuscripts without a finding aid describing what is held in an archive is daunting. The catalogues were therefore a great help but, even so, it was intimidating and overwhelming to be confronted with the approximately 16 000 titles listed in the catalogues.¹⁸ Then there are the many thousands of items in other private libraries for which there appears to be no cataloguing project under way at all. Convinced that a conservation project should unfold with a parallel research project, we had to almost

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instantly decide on subjects to pursue in the research project. Once again collaboration with scholars from Mali – and with other established scholars in the field such as John Hunwick – was the only way to proceed. Dr Mahmoud Zouber, the former director of Ahmed Baba Institute, was forthcoming and supportive from the outset, as have been the rest of our colleagues in Timbuktu, some of whom are represented in this volume.

Though the focus of the project is on the manuscripts of Timbuktu there is in fact also another purpose at the core of the South Africa–Mali project that goes beyond the preservation of this body of invaluable manuscripts in a historic African town. For the South African and Malian governments it is also a project of continental and global importance that speaks to the future. There is the comradeship that grows out of the practical and logistical aspects of government officials and citizens from two African states, thousands of kilometres apart, collaborating on a common cultural project. This collaboration is not mediated by an international agency or foundation or by northern powers. It has grown directly out of a common sense of purpose; it was not imposed but has emerged organically with all the usual and sometimes comical misunderstandings borne out of the understandable strains and headaches of working across such distances, across bureaucratic styles and language barriers. More significantly, the area of cooperation is a vastly underestimated literary heritage that is potentially a symbol of a much wider continental heritage of creativity and a written tradition in particular. This, of course, is the very opposite of what Timbuktu has come to stand for in popular culture almost across the globe: a most distant and unreachable place. Timbuktu, through the international attention generated by this and other projects, could well become a symbol, at least in the African context, of any place with large quantities of written materials. It is a place of paper and books, emphatically not a non-place.



Timbuktu persists as a subject in the travel-writing genre. The ‘mystery’ of Timbuktu can always be relied upon to attract readers.¹⁹ That Timbuktu has become synonymous with a place of remoteness and myth is not fortuitous. It is a sign of the way in which the idea of Africa was represented in discourses on the continent since at least antiquity by writers from the other side of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Ignorance and prejudice became transformed into empirical fact and philosophical principle during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Ideas became powerful supports as European companies and armies began to penetrate the continent, and thus were cast the standard modern prejudices against Africa. Popular representations of the continent reflected ignorance and arrogance, but some of the most sophisticated European thinkers also advanced the same kind of representations. These most eminent of thinkers, whose legacy we still live with, produced subtle discourses on moral philosophy and aesthetics but, when the subject of Africa came up, they reverted to truly unscholarly and nasty prose. Thus the still influential philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) wrote: ‘Humanity reaches its greatest perfection in the white race...The

Negroes are lower and the lowest are some of the American peoples.²⁰ Similarly, Hegel (1770–1831) infamously wrote that Africa was a continent without history: ‘Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.’²¹

This view of the continent would have a long and enduring legacy and shape the language of conquest and domination. Implicit in and integral to the European colonial project was a denial of history and the agency of African subjects, their cultures, social values and practices. As Frantz Fanon wrote:

...colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.²²

Thus, in the view of the colonial rulers of the twentieth century, history began with the arrival of the white man, wherever he may have set his foot on the continent. Whatever else went before or was contemporaneous with the conquests was derided, denied and denigrated. The exception lay in the way in which the great architectural and artistic works of the continent were seen: while they were recognised and preserved, they were attributed to people from outside the continent. No indigenous intelligence was possible. Even in the case of the written legacy of Africa in Timbuktu, the popular view is that the authors of the works were ‘outsiders’, ‘Arabs’.

Timbuktu in particular has a long pedigree in European imaginings of the continent. In these traditional framings, in the case of West Africa and Timbuktu, all that is relevant is the harshness of the landscape, the martial character of certain peoples, the prevalence of slavery, the futility of productive engagement with it and so on. Thus the natives had first to be subjected to imperialist rule as a precondition for civilisation before they could be treated as equal human beings.

Throughout colonialism, this inherently racist perspective permeated the very history which began to be taught in Europe and the colonies. Thus, in the West African French colonies, schoolchildren were taught to remember: ‘*nos ancêtres, les Gaulois*’ (our ancestors, the Gauls).

Yet, the impact of the colonial moment cannot easily be disavowed; it is impossible and undesirable to ignore the impact of colonial education, for instance. No African country that has experienced colonialism can ignore its impact and imprint and wish it away. This applies to Mali with its French colonial imprint as much as to South Africa with its Dutch and British marks of conquest. Adamé Ba Konaré’s observation, writing about Mali, is apposite here: ‘Malian historiography, indeed African historiography, cannot be understood outside of the colonial domination from which it came and in relation to which it is defined.’²³

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 as far as northern Mozambique, we can find rich and copious examples of Africans engaged in reading and writing as far back as the earlier centuries of the previous millennium. They unambiguously reveal the sophisticated use of a wide diversity of Africa's languages in high-level intellectual pursuits, demonstrating African peoples' capacities to express themselves in complex forms and African intellectual capabilities over the centuries. Intellectual and scholarly endeavours are an integral part of African history.

The teaching of history in South Africa has not been spared the influences of colonialism and apartheid, right into the 1990s after the end of apartheid. In 2002, then Minister of Education Kader Asmal instituted a wide-ranging process to review the curricula being taught in South African schools. The History and Archaeology Panel found that Africa's place in the world was being taught with an 'overwhelmingly Eurocentric' conception of the continent as 'mostly inert, and treated within the context of European impact through colonization'.²⁴

Initiatives such as those in the history curriculum in South Africa are therefore fundamental. The overall project on Timbuktu – building, conservation, research – is part of this reorientation of South Africa as an integral part of the continent. Thus the Timbuktu Project came to illustrate that there were places of scholarship and learning with long histories on the continent. Timbuktu was an important centre of learning whose history goes back almost a thousand years, with its intellectual high point sometime in the sixteenth century. Many of the products of this scholarship still remain, either in original form or as copies made over the years. We also know that these places were well connected through intellectual engagement and trade routes with other places of learning spread throughout the world. Thus, the author Leo Africanus wrote in the sixteenth century, 'In Timbuktu there are numerous judges, scholars and priests, all well paid by the king. Many manuscript books coming from Barbary are sold. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods.'²⁵

There were other towns across the Sahara which became known as centres of intellectual pursuit, although Timbuktu has in more recent times come to stand as a kind of symbol for these African literary activities because so many scholars spent time in it, or copies of their texts have found their way there. Furthermore, with all this attention on Timbuktu there is now also a growing enthusiasm among Malians in a number of towns – such as Jenne and Ségou – that it is possible to conserve their manuscripts without having to lose them to collectors from overseas. Thus a whole series of new projects has been established to collect and conserve papers in various locations of Mali. In Timbuktu many new family collections have been brought to the notice of researchers in the last five years.

Other places in Africa, such as Abyssinia, also had thriving centres of reading, writing and knowledge production.²⁶ 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 as far as northern Mozambique, we can find rich and copious examples of Africans engaged in reading and writing as far back as the earlier centuries of the previous millennium. They unambiguously reveal the sophisticated use of a wide diversity of Africa's languages in high-level intellectual pursuits, demonstrating African peoples' capacities to express themselves in complex forms and African intellectual capabilities over the centuries. Intellectual and scholarly endeavours have been an integral part of African history since the development of writing on the continent.

Yet within the historiography of Africa, attempts to argue for an intellectual history of Africa have often been met with the argument that Africa only has an oral tradition. This historical untruth cannot be sustained. The Timbuktu libraries contain materials that can illuminate various aspects of the intellectual pursuits of the literate elites of the region, in addition to offering other materials for historians concerned with relations of domination and slavery, among others. This new history will no doubt have to correct the hitherto most neglected aspects of the study of Africa's past, including the written legacies from the period before European colonialism. Modern scholarship and research necessarily have to deal with the disagreeable aspects of African histories; the scholars and researchers working on the manuscripts are among some of the leading specialists in the world and have in no way avoided these. On the contrary, the manuscripts serve as repositories of important historical data for virtually all aspects of life in the region and beyond.

The vast collections of manuscripts and papers that still remain in Timbuktu and its surrounds decisively confound the view of Africa as a remote, mythical entity devoid of history and of the practices of reading and writing. Moreover, the views of many historians who wrote off a whole continent – as of no consequence to humanity, as having no history, who stated that intellectual history is not a field for African historians – can no longer be sustained what with this mine of information (the basic materials in the craft of writing history) which still remains to be analysed and written up.

Adamé Ba Konaré, with all the insight of a historian and a woman close to the sources of political power in her country, has criticised the misuses of the powers of historical narrative in African nationalist historical writing. Her insight, which has also been formulated in similar terms by other scholars familiar with the crafts of history and heritage in Africa, should signal a note of caution against any new nationalist orthodoxies or 'nativist' intellectual enterprises built on the edifice of the Timbuktu manuscripts or other similar initiatives of reclaiming African pasts inside Africa and in the diaspora. She reminds us that Malian post-colonial historiography replaced colonial nationalist history with its own narrow, uncritical and unreflective nationalist history and the 'historians fell into a trap'. What happened in Mali was in keeping with so much of the history that was produced elsewhere on the continent from the 1960s onward:

...official history, directed from above and without nuance, became a true prison almost everywhere in Africa. It could not be corrected in public or even in private. When it came to the heroes, a critic ran the risk of offense, even blasphemy in relation to the warrior heroes of the past. The problem is even more complicated in Mali where it is difficult to develop an objective history when the descendants of the heroes are still alive, jealous of what they consider to be their family heritage, and sensitive to the honor due to their ancestors.²⁷

These words from a former Malian first lady who was instrumental in the programme that initiated South Africans into the heritage of Timbuktu should be heeded by Malians and South Africans who are engaged in working on the manuscript tradition of Timbuktu, and indeed more generally in the fields of heritage and the craft of historical writing. A key word to embrace in the quoted passage is ‘nuance’, for so much of it is needed when attempting to deal with any aspect of the continent’s past and present. While this project was without doubt established ‘from above’ – two presidents met and agreed on an initiative – it did not come with a historical narrative prescribed ‘from above’. This collection of essays, which is hopefully only the first of many publications to emerge from this project, is not official history and hopefully demonstrates some of the nuance that Adamé Ba Konaré points to as an absence and a shortcoming in some African historiography.

NOTES

- 1 A marabout is a religious teacher or spiritual guide. It is derived from the Arabic word *murabit*.
- 2 See Brenner (2001: esp. Chapters 1 & 2) and Bouwman (2005: Chapters 2 & 3).
- 3 See Hunwick (1999: introduction).
- 4 On this see Lecocq (2002).
- 5 For an abridged account see Mackintosh-Smith (2002: Chapter 18).
- 6 Africanus (1738); see also Davis (2006: Chapter 1).
- 7 Barth (1857).
- 8 See Unesco (2003).
- 9 Speech by the deputy president to the Constitutional Assembly on the adoption of the 1996 Constitution, on 8 May 1996, in *Debates of the Constitutional Assembly*, Vol. 3 (29 March to 11 October 1996, cols 422–427). The ‘I am an African’ speech appears to have been influenced by ANC founder Pixley Ka Seme’s ‘The regeneration of Africa’, a speech that was later published in the *Journal of the Royal Africa Society* (1905–06). See Mbeki (1998).
- 10 This team was led by Mr Themba Wakashe and consisted of Dr Graham Dominy, Mr Douwe Drijfhout, Mr Alexio Motsi and the author.
- 11 See www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm/register.
- 12 Baba (2000).
- 13 See Mahmoud Zouber’s (1977) biography of Ahmad Baba.
- 14 The term ‘manuscript’ is derived from post-classical Latin *manuscriptus*, meaning handwritten (*manu* = hand; *scriptus* = to write), used in European languages since the early sixteenth century. One definition is: ‘A book, document, etc. written by hand, esp one written before the general adoption of printing in a country; a handwritten copy of an ancient text’ (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 15 See Brenner (2001).
- 16 The phrase is from Robert Alter, ‘Committee speak’, *London Review of Books*, 19 July 2007.
- 17 Ahmed Baba Institute (1995–98); Mamma Haidara Library (2000).
- 18 I must also mention the invaluable catalogue, which covers a much wider area, of Hunwick and O’Fahey (2003).
- 19 Recent titles include Salak (2004) and Freemantle (2005).
- 20 Kant (1802: 15).
- 21 Hegel (1872: 95–103).
- 22 Fanon (1963: 210).
- 23 Konaré (2000: 15–22).
- 24 DoE (2003: 44–45).

- 25 Africanus (1738).
 26 Tamrat (1972).
 27 Konaré (2000: 18).

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