The Timbuktu Manuscript Tradition

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Introduction

Islam first entered the African continent nearly 1400 years ago. The first Muslims to enter Africa were early followers of the Prophet Muhammad, who sought refuge in Christian Ethiopia in what is often called "the first "*hijra*" in about the year 615 A.D. Just a quarter of a century later many more Muslim Arabs pushed their way into Egypt during the great expansion of the lands of the Caliphate during the caliphate of Umar b. al-Khattab in 640-1. Before the end of the 7th century, the territory of the Caliphate had been extended westwards to the Atlantic Ocean, covering what are now the countries of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

Although some exploratory thrusts were made into the Sahara, no actual conquests were made; instead expansion turned northwards across the Mediterranean and into the Iberian peninsula. Over the coming centuries, however, Islam was introduced to some of the nomadic peoples of the Sahara, and some of the black African kingdoms along the borders of the southern Sahara. This was done not through any form of conquest or political dominance, but through the agency of Muslim traders, whose primary objective was to obtain gold which was mined in certain parts of West Africa, largely in territory that now forms part of the Republic of Mali. By the end of the 11th century a number of African rulers in this region had become Muslims, and the majority populace of the Berber tribes of the western Sahara belonged to Islam.

Timbuktu's development

According to the *Ta'rikh al-Sudan*, a chronicle of the Songhay Empire (written in the 17th century),[1] the origins of Timbuktu go back to around the year 1100, when some nomads established a summer camp a few miles away from the river Niger as a base from which they could pasture and water their camels during the hottest season. Timbuktu's position proved strategic for commerce. This camp site gradually attracted people who settled there and turned it into a permanent dwelling place. It was situated at the junction of the dry Sahara and the lush central valley of the river Niger, a waterway that constituted an easy pathway for transporting goods to and from the more tropical regions of West Africa. Over the early centuries of its existence Timbuktu rapidly attracted settlers, in the form of merchants, and then Muslim scholars, from Saharan oases such as Walata, Touat, Ghadames, and the Fezzan, and from the southern reaches of Morocco. Ghadames

traders played an important role in Timbuktu trade from the 15th to the 19th century, and also in trade with Kano in northern Nigeria. Ghadames was a gateway to Tripoli and for routes leading to Egypt. Similarly, Touat was a trade entrepôt, with routes radiating out to Fez, Algiers and Tunis in the north, and Gao, Agades, and Katsina in the south.

Timbuktu's importance as a center of commerce is vividly illustrated by its first appearance on a European map in the year 1375. This was a map draw for the Catalan ruler Charles V by a cartographer of Mallorca, who was Jewish, this information no doubt reflecting the role played by Jewish merchants in trans-Saharan trade. A quarter of a century earlier Timbuktu had been visited by the extraordinary Muslim traveler from Tangier, Ibn Battuta, who found there the grave of an Andalusian poet, Abu Is'haq Ibrahim al-Sahili, who had accompanied the ruler of Mali, Mansa Musa, upon his return from pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325. Timbuktu at that time was part of the great medieval empire of Mali, and it was this ruler, Mansa Musa, who ordered the construction of Timbuktu's Great Mosque — Jingere Ber — and the Andalusian al-Sahili, who oversaw the construction of it.

The building of a great congregational mosque clearly established Timbuktu as an Islamic city, and over the next two centuries many Muslim scholars were attracted to settle in it, so that by the mid-15th century Timbuktu had become a major center of Islamic learning.

Timbuktu scholarship

Many of the scholars settled in the north-eastern quarter of the city, called Sankore, where another large mosque was built and named after the quarter. The Sankore mosque was also a location for teaching Islamic texts, though individual scholars also taught their students in, or near, their own houses. It was in these homes of scholars that the establishment of libraries took place. Some of these personal libraries were evidently quite large. Timbuktu's most celebrated scholar, Ahmad Baba (1564-1627) claimed that his library contained 1,600 volumes, and that it was the smallest library of any of his family — his family, the Aqit, being the leading scholarly family that had provided the city with *qadis* throughout the 16th century. Ahmad Baba was, of course, part of the Timbuktu teaching tradition. His primary shaykh was a certain Muhammad Baghayogho, a Mande Dyula scholar who had migrated to Timbuktu from Jenne. To illustrate the teaching tradition, here is part of a biography of Muammad Baghayogho, recorded by his pupil Ahmad Baba in his famous biographical dictionary *Nayl al-ibtihaj*. He described him as:

Our shaykh and our [source of] blessing, the jurist, and accomplished scholar, a pious and ascetic man of God, who was among the finest of God's righteous servants and practising scholars. He was a man given by nature to goodness and benign intent, guileless, and naturally disposed to goodness, believing in people to such an extent that all men were virtually equal in his sight, so well did he think of them and absolve them of wrongdoing. Moreover, he was constantly attending to people's needs, even at cost to himself, becoming distressed at their misfortunes, mediating their disputes, and giving counsel.

Add to this his love of learning, and his devotion to teaching—in which pursuit he spent his days—his close association with men of learning, and his own utter humility, his lending of his most rare and precious books in all fields without asking for them back again,

no matter what discipline they were in. Thus it was that he lost a portion of his books—may God shower His beneficence upon him for that! Sometimes a student would come to his door asking for a book, and he would give it to him without even knowing who the student was. In this matter he was truly astonishing, doing this for the sake of God Most High, despite his love for books and his zeal in acquiring them, whether by purchase or copying. One day I came to him asking for books on grammar, and he hunted through his library and brought me everything he could find on the subject.

It is clear from this that the man himself possessed a considerable library, to which any aspiring scholar could have access.

What kind of books would such a library have contained? First and foremost, it would have contained the texts that were used to teach his students: commentaries on the Qur'an, books of *hadith*, theological treatises in the mainstream Sunni tradition, and works of Maliki jurisprudence (*fiqh*), such as the *Muwatta'* of Malik b. Anas, the *Mudawwana* of Sahnun, the *Risala* of Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani, and the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil b. Ishaq, with some of its many commentaries, and works on Arabic grammar such as the *i Alfiyya* of Ibn Malik and the *Mulhat al-i'rab* of al-Hariri. But Timbuktu scholarship went beyond the teaching of basic texts. We know, for example that Ahmad Baba had access to the great "History" of Ibn Khaldun (*Kitab al-'ibar*), a work which he quotes from in one of his writings.[2] In the same work he also quotes passages from al-Suyuti's *Raf' sha'n al-Hubshan* ["Raising the status of Ethiopians"], a less than commonly circulating work.

Manuscript books

Indeed, there was clearly an important trade in books in 16th century Timbuktu. This is clear from the account of Leo Africanus (al-Hasan b. Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Zayyati), who visited Timbuktu in the early years of that century and observed, "Many manuscript books coming from Barbary are sold. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods". Not only were manuscripts imported to Timbuktu, both from North Africa and Egypt, but scholars going on pilgrimage often studied in both Mecca and, on the way back, in Cairo, and copied texts to add to their own libraries. There was also an active copying industry in Timbuktu itself. One amazing piece of evidence for this is a work that the scholar Ahmad b. Anda Ag-Muhammad had copied for himself in the late 16th century.

The work referrred to is an Arabic dictionary, the *Muhkam* of the Andalusian scholar Ibn Sidah (d. 1066) and the copying of the full work, running to twenty-eight volumes, was completed in April 1574. What is interesting about these volumes—some now preserved in Morocco—is that their colophons throw some light on the copying industry of 16th-century Timbuktu, thus confirming the interest in book collection and library building. The colophons name the copyists, the person for whom they were copied, and who provided the blank paper for them, the dates of beginning and ending the copying of each volume, and the amount paid to the copyists. The colophons, in essence, constitute a labour contract. Two of the volumes contain a second colophon, in which another person records that he proofread the accuracy of the copying, and records what he was paid. The copyist received 1 *mithqal* of gold (about 1/7 oz.) per volume, and the proofreader half that amount. It would appear, from the evidence provided in these various colophons, that manuscript copying was a truly professionalised business. Compensation was paid by legal contract, and it would seem that both the copyist and the proofreader (himself also a professional

copyist) worked full time to complete their contracted tasks; the copyist was copying some 142 lines of text per day, while the proofreader was going through the material at the rate of about 171 lines of text per day.[3]

Libraries

We know less about whether or not there were public libraries in 16th century Timbuktu. One of the rulers of the Songhay empire, which incorporated Timbuktu within it in 1468, Askiya *al-hajj* Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr (1493-1528) made an endowment of 60 *juz'* (segments) (equivalent to two complete copies) of the Qur'an to the Great Mosque of Timbuktu, and it is said that a later ruler, Askiya Dawud (1549-1583), set up public libraries in his state, though no trace of them has ever been discovered.

What has survived, however, is the private collection (or parts of it) of one of the two great chroniclers of Timbuktu, Mahmud Kati (d. 1593), now looked after by one of his descendants in Timbuktu, Ismael Haidara, who reassembled it from various branches of the Kati family who had inherited it over generations. He invited me to see a number of items from this library when I was in Timbuktu in August 1999. I was truly amazed to see that the copying of some of these manuscripts went back to the 16th, and even in some cases, the 15th century. For example, I saw a beautiful copy of the Qur'an in a fine eastern script with a copying date equivalent to 1420. The final page was, in fact, written in Turkish, and recorded the fact that the copy had been dedicated as a *waqf* ("endowment") in the name of a woman named as Sharifa Khadija Khanum. How this manuscript got to Timbuktu we do not know. But possibly it was purchased by Mahmud Kati, or some member of his family, whilst on pilgrimage.

Another very old and very beautiful manuscript is a copy of the *Kitab al-Shifa' bi-ta'rif huquq al-Mustafa* (on the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad) by the 11th-century Moroccan scholar, *Qadi* 'Iyad. Although we do not know the date of copying, a note at the end of volume 1 tells us that it was purchased in 1468. What is truly surprising is that it was purchased in a Saharan oasis by a man migrating from Toledo in Spain to "the land of the Blacks" (*bilad al-sudan*), hoping, as he put it, that God would grant him repose there.[4]

The writer of the note and purchaser of the manuscript turns out to be the grandfather of Mahmud Kati, so evidently the male ancestry of the family was from central Spain, and appears to claim Visigoth origins. However, they settled in West Africa and married locally, since Mahmud Kati himself uses an ethnic label (*nisba*) that relates him to the Soninke people (Wa'rkuri), and it is possible that he was related to the ruling dynasty, the Askiyas, of the Songhay empire, whose male ancestry was also Soninke.

The Kati library (known as Fondo Kati), however, is not the only valuable library in Timbuktu. A collection of 5,000 Arabic manuscripts was inherited by Abdelkader Mamma Haidara from his father, and that has now been housed in a new library building (Bibliothèque Commemorative Mamma Haidara), funded by the American Mellon foundation through Harvard University, and the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation (London) has already published a catalogue of it.[5]

There are, in fact, some twenty private manuscript libraries in Timbuktu, and approximately one hundred in the sixth region of Mali.[6]

Ahmad Baba Centre

The largest library of Arabic manuscripts, however, is a public one in Timbuktu at the Ahmad Baba Centre for Documentation and Historical Research, generally known as CEDRAB, an abbreviation of its French title (Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmad Baba). The origins of that centre go back to a meeting that I was privileged to attend in 1967. When UNESCO was beginning to plan its multi-volume history of Africa, it convened a "Meeting of Experts" in Timbuktu to examine the range of Arabic sources for African history. At the conclusion of the meeting, chaired by Najm al-Din Bammate (a UNESCO official of Afghan origin), a resolution was passed calling on the government of Mali to establish a centre for the preservation of Arabic manuscripts in Timbuktu. Some years later, after funding had been raised, the centre was built, and soon manuscripts were being obtained, either by gift or purchase, from private libraries in Timbuktu. It developed and expanded considerably after the appointment in the late 1970s of the Timbuktu scholar Dr Mahmoud Zouber, who directed CEDRAB for some fifteen years.

CEDRAB now contains close to 20,000 manuscripts, ranging from single-page archival documents to large scholarly tomes. A handlist of the first 9,000 items has been published by the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation.[7]

The great majority of the items preserved at the Centre Ahmad Baba are of local authorship, though some non-local items have been acquired if they were donated by other library owners.

Almost all the items are in the Arabic language, though the index does record the existence of a letter in Tamacheq and several poems and letters in the Songhay language—the only examples of this language written in the Arabic script so far preserved as far as we know yet.

Arabic writing

It is important to note that whilst Arabic was to Muslim Africa what Latin was to medieval Christian Europe, Africans adopted, and sometimes adapted, the Arabic script, just as Europeans appropriated the Latin script, to express themselves in their own languages. Hence many Africans could write their own languages long before European missionaries and colonialists came to impose their own forms of writing upon them — and in fact replacing the Arabic script and suppressing its usage in the case of such major languages as Hausa (N. Nigeria) and Swahili (E. African coast).

It is difficult to do justice to the richness of the collection in a brief article, but it may be worthwhile to indicate some of the principal categories of materials and to give illustrative examples of one of them. There are two broad categories of material:

1) Items of a "literary" character—religious treatises, chronicles, and poems, all of which (or most of which) may be attributed to a named author.

2) Items of a documentary character, such as letters, and commercial and legal documents (including a large number related to slavery).

Between these two categories come a large number of items that are in one sense documents and in another sense—in that they are written by scholarly authors—works belonging to a literary tradition. These are the *fatwa*s (legal opinions)—both individual ones on specific topics and collected volumes—*rasa'il* and *ajwiba* ("responsa"), often on quite specific topics but addressed to particular individuals or groups. There are a

dozen or so major collections of *fatwas* at CEDRAB, totalling over 1,800 folios. Some of these are collections of the legal opinions of a particular scholar, whilst others are more diverse collections of opinions of the scholars of the region as a whole. Most of the collections by single individuals are, in fact, by scholars of "Mauritanian" origin, though the major one is by the Kunta scholar Shaykh Bay b. Sidi Umar al-Kunti (1865-1920+) of northwest Mali, which runs to some 488 folios, in nine volumes (nos. 118-126). There are also three copies of the major collection of the *fatwas* of the scholars of West Africa—*al-Amal al-mashkur fi jam' nawazil ulama' al-Takrur* by al-Mustafa b. Ahmad al-Ghallawi (nos. 521, 1031 & 5346).

As an illustration of this, here is a short list of some of the topics dealt with in these *fatwas* and *responsa*, mainly dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries:

i) On dwelling with the Christians.

ii) On lost camels.

iii) On ritual purity.

iv) On a wife's rejection of her husband's authority (*i nushuz*).

v) On whether is it permissible to eat with a man who fails to perform pre-worship ablutions without valid reason.

vi) On a slave who committed a crime against a free boy.

vii) On the purchasing of plundered goods.

viii) On division of inheritance.

ix) On cutting down trees in order to feed goats.

x) On a man and woman who befriended one another, claiming that they were related through milk kinship (i.e. had been breast-fed by the same woman).

xi) On a married couple who were told after many years of marriage that they were in fact related through milk kinship.

xii) On a man who married a woman without anyone telling him she was within the prohibited degrees of marriage.

xiii) On the failure of women to observe veiling (*hijab*).

These and other *fatwas* will eventually help us to better understand the nature of social and economic issues in the Timbuktu region in the 18th to early 20th centuries, and how Islamic law regulated them.

As regards purely religious issues, there is relatively little writing, since all the Muslims of the Timbuktu region have been Ash'ari Sunnis and adherents of the Maliki *madh'hab*. The one exception is the conflictual literature over Sufism. Prior to the 19th century the only Sufi *tariqa* in the region was the Qadiriyya. By the middle of the 19th century the new Tijaniyya *tariqa* ([spiritual "path" following the teachings of Ahmad al-Tijani, who died in Morocco in 1815) had been introduced into the broader region, and gained adherents. The two *tariqas* became rivals, especially since they were also associated with political leaders. Some also rallied against Ahmad al-Tijan's spiritual claims, and his assertion of the uniqueness of his *tariqa*, and his refusal to allow his followers to have association with any other Sufi shaykh.

Research projects

In conclusion, I introduce projects I am involved in to perpetuate the Timbuktu library legacy, and to make the city's intellectual heritage more widely accessible. The first of these, which I initiated a decade ago, is called "Arabic Literature of Africa", or ALA for short. The object of it is to produce a series of published volumes — a total of at least six — as a guide to the Muslim writers of Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa and their writings, principally in Arabic, as the title suggests, but also including anything they also wrote in African languages that were, before the 20th century, written using the Arabic script. Writers are grouped together according to their relationships to one another; family, ethnic group, city, Sufi *tariqa*, etc. Each author is presented through a brief biography; then his/her works are listed alphabetically, with indications of where manuscript copies are to be found, and if they have been published.

Hence, a researcher will eventually be able to trace any work written in Arabic in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa. So far two volumes have been published in English, and will soon be republished in Arabic. ALA 1 deals with the Sudan down to 1900, and was prepared by Professor Sean O'Fahey of the University of Bergen (Norway), published in 1994. ALA 2, which I prepared, covers Nigeria and Chad, and was published in 1995. ALA 4, which I also prepared, is to appear in 2003, running to some 800 pages. It covers the Timbuktu tradition and the rest of Mali, as well as Senegal, Guinea, Niger and Ghana. Sean O'Fahey has prepared ALA 3A, recently published, covering Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, and before long volume 3B, on the Swahili coast of East Africa (including writings in Swahili as well as Arabic), will appear as ALA 3B. The two of us are working on ALA 5, "Literature of the Sudan in the 20th century", and later I will work with other colleagues to produce ALA 6, covering the Western Sahara.[8]

The ALA project is now a key element of the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), which we inaugurated in January 2000 within the Program of African Studies at Northwestern University. The principle objectives of ISITA are:

1. To preserve, and disseminate information on, African Arabic manuscript libraries.
2. To establish networks of collaboration between African, American, and European scholars working on the Islamic intellectual tradition in Africa.
3. To bring scholars together to discuss multiple aspects of Islamic thought in Africa through workshops, colloquia and conferences.
4. To promote the publication of collective volumes of studies arising from scholarly meetings, and essential works of reference relating to the Islamic intellectual tradition in Africa, including translations of some works.

Timbuktu has been the focus of much of my research for the past forty years, and I have been fortunate enough to be able to work on editing and translating some manuscripts. The largest work was just the English translation of the Ta'rikh al-Sudan., a chronicle of the Songhay empire, with focus on Timbuktu, by the Timbuktu historian Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di, written in about 1656. This work was first published with a French translation a century ago, but I wanted it to be more easily accessible to students and scholars who do not read either Arabic or French (particularly in Africa), especially since it contains two chapters on the Islamic intellectual tradition of Timbuktu down to the early 17th century (see note 1 below).

The other 17th century Timbuktu manuscript worked on was the responses given by the famous scholar Ahmad Baba to questions about the lawfulness of retaining enslaved black Africans of various ethnic groups (see note 2 below). This led Ahmad Baba to define which West African ethnic groups were to be considered "pagans" and which were Muslims (since it was unlawful for Muslims to enslave adherents of their religion).

The most recent manuscript worked on (but not yet published) is an epistle, written in the late 19th century, condemning what the author said he had heard during a visit to Morocco, that to be black was automatically to be a slave; entitled *i Tanbih ahl al-tughyan 'ala hurriyyat al-sudan* ("Notifying oppressionists about the freedom of Blacks"). The author argues that within Islam no such argument can be made on a legal basis, and that so many black Africans are Muslims that the relationship of slavery to blackness is religiously unsound.

A further choice for editing and translation is manuscript no. 1045 of CEDRAB, of which there is also a copy in the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library. Title: *Shifa' al-asqam al-'arida fi'l-zahir wa'l-batin min al-ajsam*, written by a member of the Kunta semi-nomadic group. A work on healing, the manuscript book consists of four sections as follows:

1. The benefits of (divine) names, Koranic verses, and prayers.
2. The benefits of animals and what they give birth to.
3. The benefits of herbal plants.
4. The benefits of minerals taken from mines and elsewhere.

As work continues on its manuscripts, Timbuktu will cease to be seen just as a legendary fantasy, and will be recognised for what it really was: a spiritual and intellectual jewel inspired by the Islamic faith.

NOTES

1. For a translation, see John Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, new paperback edition, 2003.
2. That work of Ahmad Baba is his response to questions about slavery send to him from Touat; see John Hunwick and Fatima Harrak, *Mi'raj al-su'ud: Ahmad Baba's Replies on slavery*, Rabat: Institut des Etudes Africaines, Université Mohammed V, 2000.
3. An image and translations of the pair of colophons of one volume can be seen in Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, pp. 353-5.
4. Text and translation of this purchase record are in John O. Hunwick, 'Studies in *Ta'rikh al-fattash*, III: Kati Origins', Sudanic Africa, 12 (2001), 111-114.
5. *Catalogue of Manuscripts in Mamma Haidara Library*, 3 vols., London: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2000.
6. See Abdel Kader Haidara, 'Bibliothèques du désert: difficultés et perspectives' in *Les Bibliothèques du Désert*, ed. Attilio Gaudio, Paris: l'Harmattan, 2002, pp. 187-204.
7. *Handlist of Manuscripts in the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba*, Timbuktu, 5 vols., London: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 1995-8.
8. All volumes of ALA are being published by Brill Academic Pulishers, Leiden .