TIMBUKTU: A SANCTUARY FOR SCHOLARS

‘In Timbuktu there are numerous judges, scholars and priests, all well paid by the king, who greatly honours learned men. Many manuscript books coming from Barbary are sold. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods.’

Leo Africanus
The famous pilgrimage of Mansa Musa in 1325 aroused great interest abroad in the Malian Empire, which became known far and wide for its wealth and piety. As Timbuktu established itself during the 14th century as a centre of commercial interchange between tropical Africa and Saharan and Mediterranean Africa, it began to attract men of religion as well as men of business – the two categories sometimes overlapping. By the mid-15th century it was as much a city of learning as it was a city of commerce. Its prosperity meant that scholars could afford the leisure to study and teach and had the means to buy and commission copies of books. These conditions attracted scholars and students from the entire region – from West African towns such as Djenne and Walata, from the Saharan oases, and from Mediterranean Africa.

The ulama or learned men of Timbuktu fulfilled a wide variety of roles. They all had their constituencies: qadis dispensed justice and were leading citizens of their communities; imams had their mosque congregations; teachers had their colleagues and students; rural holy men were like parish priests, involved in all aspects of the life-cycle of their flock; other learned men provided medical or legal advice. The role of the qadi was particularly significant and arose from the great dynamism of commercial life in Timbuktu, and the need to protect stored goods and to settle disputes between city dwellers and passers-through. By means of their spiritual leadership and qadi functions, the scholars regulated the affairs of Timbuktu, negotiated with rulers and exerted a great influence on the politics and the administration of the city. The same scholar might hold both the post of qadi and the post of imam during his lifetime. Collectively, their task was to uphold the faith and to translate it into action. That could include ensuring that the rulers themselves observed the religion faithfully. On occasion, inevitably, they came into conflict with the city’s overlords.

Timbuktu’s scholars experienced a major setback in 1468, when the city was sacked by Sonni Ali Ber (r. 1464–92), ruler of the expanding...
Songhay Empire. Sonni Ali had an ambiguous attitude towards Islam. He drove the Sanhaja out of Timbuktu and undertook a purge of the scholars, particularly those of Sanhaja stock, whom he suspected of aiding and abetting their ruling kin, the Tuareg. Many fled to Walata, and many who remained lost their lives. But his successor Askia Muhammad (r. 1493–1529) was the first of a new dynasty, and his accession brought a sea-change in relations. Askia Muhammad was considered to be a sincere Muslim. He soon went on pilgrimage to Mecca, and returned imbued with the baraka or divine grace of one who has visited ‘God’s House’ (bayt Allah – the Ka’ba). He adopted a conciliatory approach towards the scholars, setting the stage for a century of equilibrium between the ruling estate and the religious estate, each respecting the domain of the other, and overtly or implicitly giving the other support.

By the 16th century Arabic-Islamic scholarship was again flourishing in Timbuktu, and many scholars set up permanent residence there. During the period of the Songhay Empire down to 1551, there was considerable support for the Muslim scholars of the city and the renovation of the city’s mosques was underwritten by the state. A subtle balance was achieved between the ruling estate and the diverse body of scholars, mystics and holy men who made up the religious estate. The Songhay Askiyas, while exercising full political power, saw that it was in their interest to maintain harmonious relations with these men of religion. Gifts in cash and kind, including slaves, grants of land and privilege, especially exemption from taxation, ensured their moral support and spiritual services and, importantly, protected rulers from the possibility of their calling down divine retribution.

Askia Dawud, who reigned from 1549 to 1583, is said to have established public libraries in his kingdom. The Tarikh al-fattash tells us that: ‘Askia Dawud... was a sultan held in awe, eloquent, a born leader, generous, magnanimous, cheerful and good-humoured, fond of joking. God
bestowed on him the goods of this world in abundance. He was the first to establish repositories of goods and even libraries. He had calligraphers copying books for him, and would sometimes make gifts of these to scholars. I was told...that he had memorized the Koran, and had studied the Risala [a book on Islamic law] from beginning to end. He had a shaykh who would come to him and teach him during the middle hours of the day.”

SCHOLARSHIP IN THE POST-SONGHAY ERA
The Golden Age for the Timbuktu scholars, however, did not outlast the Songhay Empire. Following the Moroccan conquest of 1591 the scholars again found themselves suspected of treason, and in 1593, several were arrested by the Moroccan Pasha. Believing that the scholars had been behind an uprising in the city, the Pasha ordered that their goods and libraries be systematically plundered. This harassment lasted until the Sultan al-Mansur sent emissaries to Timbuktu to instruct the Pasha not to do them any further harm. But after the scholars had already been in prison for almost five months, the Pasha began to dispatch them to Marrakesh, a journey which took 64 days across the desert. The entire Agit family of reknowned scholars was exiled to Morocco, where all but Ahmed Baba died. The status of the scholars of Timbuktu was thus eroded, and many departed for other centres of learning. The tradition of teaching continued, but there was a perceptible decline in standards of scholarship in the city during the 17th century.

In the period following the Moroccan invasion, Timbuktu’s scholarly traditions were upheld through historical writing in the form of local chronicles and biographical dictionaries. History was never part of the teaching curriculum in Timbuktu, nor anywhere else in the Islamic world. Apart from ‘sacred history’ – the life of the Prophet and his companions, and the ‘Rightly-Guided’ caliphs – it was a ‘worldly’ subject, one of which a well-educated scholar might be expected to have some knowledge, but
not seen as knowledge leading to salvation. Nevertheless, it is clear that Timbuktu scholars took a keen interest in history. Although the chronicles of Timbuktu were not compiled until well into the 17th century, both the *Tarikh al-sudan* and the *Tarikh al-fattash* were partially based upon accounts handed down orally or in written form from earlier periods. Historical writings helped Muslim communities to define their identities, a necessary exercise for those living in remote areas surrounded largely by non-Muslim peoples. Local histories were also a useful affirmation of community solidarity for those dwelling in recognized centres of Islam, such as Timbuktu, Arawan and Djenne. The Timbuktu chronicle tradition which developed at this time appears to have spread far and wide over West Africa.

The *Tarikh al-sudan*, completed in 1655 by Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi, deserves to be ranked as one of the great African chronicles. It covers the history of the Middle Niger region from the founding of Timbuktu to the Moroccan occupation. Without it, our knowledge of the workings of one of Africa’s greatest pre-modern empires would be considerably diminished and our understanding of a notable Islamic civilization much impoverished. During his travels in West Africa, Heinrich Barth found a copy of what was probably the *Tarikh al-sudan* (although he attributed it to Ahmed Baba), and much of the historical information in Barth’s writing about West Africa was extracted from this text.

The *Tarikh al-fattash*, attributed to Mahmud Kati, is the other great chronicle of Timbuktu and the Middle Niger region. This was written about the same time as the *Tarikh al-sudan*. Three sons of Mahmud Kati completed the work which was later revised by a son of his daughter and finally finished in 1665.

These chronicles were often called upon in subsequent periods to legitimize political rights. One surviving manuscript version of the *Tarikh al-fattash* was textually manipulated by an early 19th-century scholar of
Masina at the bequest of Shaykh Ahmadu Lobbo (d. 1843), ruler of the Islamic state of Hamdallah in Masina in the southern Inland Delta. He adjusted the chronicle to support his claim to be the twelfth ‘true caliph’ of Islam and the rightful successor to the territory and resources (especially the servile groups) of the Songhay emperor Askia Muhammad.

From the second half of the 18th century, there was a significant revival of intellectual activities in almost the entire Sahelian region, which gave rise to a dramatically increased level of literary production. Two nomadic tribes, the Kounta and the Kel al-Suq, played a leading part. Over five hundred works were authored by Kounta scholars in this period. In the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, desert shaikhs from these and other clerical groups eclipsed the urban scholars as the region’s political and spiritual authorities.

**INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS OF SCHOLARSHIP**

Timbuktu was by far the most important centre of Islamic scholarship in the Middle Niger region during the period up to 1800, especially after 1500 when it surpassed both Walata and Djenne. There had been in the 15th century much coming and going of scholars between these cities and Timbuktu, but in the 16th century Timbuktu became the chief pole of attraction. The other great city of the area, Gao, capital of the Songhay Empire, produced no writers, so far as we know, for most scholars preferred to distance themselves from the seat of political authority.

Islamic knowledge of the Timbuktu scholars in the 16th-century period came from a variety of sources. There were scholarly networks connecting Timbuktu with Fez, and some North African and Andalusian scholars visited or settled in or near Timbuktu. But even more significant were connections forged with fellow scholars in Egypt and Mecca during pilgrimage journeys. Through pilgrimages to Mecca, continuous contacts were made with the great scholars and centres of learning in the Middle
East. Many West African scholars spent time en route in Egypt studying with scholars of repute, particularly those associated with the prestigious al-Azhar Mosque, where they received teaching authorizations (ijaza) in various disciplines. Known as the ‘cradle of Islamic learning’, the schools associated with al-Azhar specialized in Islamic law, theology, and the Arabic language, as well as – for a period – philosophy and medical studies.

The Egyptian scholar Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, one of the most celebrated scholars of his day, took a lively interest in the affairs of West Africa. The Songhay ruler Askia Muhammad is said to have met and studied with him in Egypt during his pilgrimage journey in 1497. Al-Suyuti wrote for him a small work on government drawn from the literature of the Hadith (the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad), and gave him advice, admonitions, fatwas (formal legal opinions), and his baraka (blessing).

TEACHING TRADITIONS
The core of the Islamic teaching tradition is the receiving of a text, which is handed down through a chain of transmitters or silsilah from the teacher to the student, preferably through the shortest and most prestigious set of intermediaries. Typically, the student would make his own copy from his teacher’s dictation and then read it back to him, or listen while another student read his copy. When he had a correct copy he could then study the meaning of the text and its technical intricacies through lectures delivered by his teacher, and at a higher level by question and answer. Many different texts would be studied along with commentaries written at other times in other parts of the Muslim world. These teaching methods continue to this day in much of the Islamic world.

The mosque that was chiefly associated with teaching was the Sankore Mosque. Sankore is a quarter in the northeast of Timbuktu, and its name means ‘white nobles’, the term ‘white’ here referring to the light-skinned Sanhaja. The Sankore quarter attracted many scholars to live,
study and teach, thus gaining a reputation as a centre of higher learning, a type of ‘Latin Quarter’. However, there is no evidence of a centralized teaching institution in Timbuktu, nor of an official diploma provided by these institutions other than the traditional turban endowed upon the learned. The Djingereber and Sidi Yahia Mosques were also used as locations for classes. But much of the day-to-day teaching process took place in scholars’ houses, probably in special rooms set apart, where the scholar had his own private library which he could consult when knotty points arose. Teachers issued individual licences or ijaza authorizing students in turn to teach particular texts. The value of such a licence lay wholly in the reputation of the teacher. It was not unusual at that time to study under six or seven different tutors, one for each subject. The tutor would be compensated by the student with money, poultry, cows, sheep, clothing, or services depending upon the means of the student’s family.

During the height of the Songhay Empire, it has been estimated that Timbuktu had perhaps as many as 25,000 students, amounting to a quarter of the city’s population. The level of teaching was comparable to that of many centres of learning in North Africa and the Middle East. One professor is reported to have arrived in Timbuktu with the intention of teaching, but after participating in a discussion with some of the city’s students and seeing the level of their learning, he was humbled and decided to become a student himself.

 Treatises on teaching techniques have survived among the manuscript collections of Timbuktu. These include discussions of methods for learning to read, advice on how to improve memory, suggestions on what should be taught, and descriptions of the ideal teacher. As for the ideal student, according to one author he must be: ‘modest, courageous, patient and studious; he must listen carefully to his professor and have a solid understanding of his lessons before memorizing them. The students must learn to debate between themselves to deepen
their understanding of the material. They must always have a great respect and a profound love for their teacher, because these are the conditions for professional success."15

THE TEACHING CURRICULUM

Most of the books in the libraries of Timbuktu were related to the religion of Islam, many imported, copied from imported editions, or translated into local languages. They included Korans, collections of Hadith, Sufi writings, theology, Koranic exegesis, law, and related disciplines. Poetry in praise of the Prophet and seeking his intercession was a popular form of writing. By the 15th century, Timbuktu's scholars were producing original works as well as compiling new derivations and commentaries on established texts as aids to teaching.

There was no 'official' curriculum in Timbuktu, but certain texts were fundamental across generations. The Koran, memorized in childhood, was of course the foundation. Also regularly studied were the two 'authentic' collections of Hadith, the Sahih of al-Bukhari and the Sahih of Muslim, as well as the Kitab al-Shifa' by the Almoravid Qadi Iyad, a work of piety centred on the Prophet, his qualities and the reverence due to him. Next in importance were the fundamental works of the Maliki school of Islamic law, the dominant form in West Africa, North Africa and Egypt, which is still studied along with its manifold commentaries today. By the late 16th century scholars had available to them the great twelve-volume collection of Maliki fatwas of North Africa and Andalusia by Ahmed al-Wansharisi (d. 1508). Other principal texts of the Maliki school of Islamic law included the Risala of Ibn Abi Zayd of Qayrawan (d. 977) and the Mukhtasar of Khalil ibn Ishaq of Alexandria (d. 1374).

From Ahmed Baba's account of his own education we know that other disciplines were available for study in 16th-century Timbuktu too, including rhetoric, logic, prosody, astronomy, and of course Arabic

LEFT A copy of the Dala'il al-Khayrat from the Ahmed Baba Institute. See also page 91. Like its calligraphy, the geometric cover design of this work reflects its Hausa origins.

ABOVE Manuscript with loose cover from the Mohamed Tahir Library. It was traditional in Timbuktu to leave manuscripts unbound but wrapped in a loose leather cover, often with a flap and tied with string. Several works might be assembled under a single cover, causing headaches for modern cataloguers.