

# The Tombouctou Manuscripts Project

Timbuktu has often been invoked as a symbol of the most distant place on Earth, as a mysterious and exotic, but unreachable, attraction. Historically, it was an important centre of commerce and learning and, in contemporary times, it has become a key symbol of African literary heritage.

Indeed, it has a rich and diverse heritage and a fascinating past. The city and its desert environs are an archive of handwritten texts in Arabic and in African languages in the Arabic script, produced between the 13th and the 20th centuries. The manuscript libraries of Timbuktu are significant repositories of scholarly production in West Africa and the Sahara. Given the large number of manuscript collections it is surprising that Timbuktu as an archive remains largely unknown and under-used. Thus, Timbuktu's manuscript collections deserve close study, and therefore, a significant starting-point for reflecting on Africa's written traditions.

Recognizing its significance as a site of African architecture and of its scholarly past, UNESCO declared Timbuktu a World Heritage Site in 1990. In 2003, a South Africa-Mali Timbuktu Manuscripts Project was officially launched, and a major achievement of this project was the new library-archive building, which was inaugurated in Timbuktu in January 2009.

The Tombouctou Manuscripts Project at the University of Cape Town is dedicated to research various aspects of writing and reading the handwritten works of Timbuktu and beyond. Training young researchers is an integral part of its work. The project was conceptualized in 2002, was officially established in 2003 to research and document manuscript tradition in Africa.

Over the past seven years a team has been involved in the study of manuscript tradition in Africa, including manuscript translation, digitalization and historical studies of book and library traditions. Although the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project incorporates researchers from Africa and beyond, who are involved in studies of book history and manuscript traditions of Africa, the core team is based at South Africa's University of Cape Town. The team is led by Shamil Jeppie and currently consists of four graduate students, and although the Project focuses on manuscript traditions throughout the African continent, it was initially inspired by the written heritage of Timbuktu. Hence, researchers are involved in the ongoing translation of materials from the Ahmed Baba and Mamma Haidara collections. Thus far, due to researchers' individual areas of focus, there has been an emphasis on the translation of manuscripts related to fatawa (Islamic legal rulings), Sufi practices and women. A collection of these translations are in preparation for publication. Second, the Project regularly organizes training for young scholars and researchers affiliated with the Project. These workshops are intended to assist scholars with their research, and to encourage interaction between scholars affiliated with the Project.

The scope of this training is broad, including language courses (in Arabic, French and English), public speaking workshops, academic writing seminars, as well as information technology and research skills workshops. And in addition to skills-training, reading groups have been organized based on relevant topics, including the history of the book, archive theory and the history of reading.

The Project also works in the town of Jenne lies in the Inland Niger Delta region of Mali. Its history is closely linked with that of Timbuktu: Jenne was also part of the trans-Saharan Trade route and, as with Timbuktu, the town became an important centre of Islamic scholarship. Jenne's rich scholarly legacy is manifested in its contemporary manuscript collections, held mostly in family homes throughout Jenne and its surrounding areas. The focus is on research and preservation projects addressing the Jenne manuscripts are still emerging. After visiting the town in 2009, the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project has committed to assisting local efforts to preserve and begin research into these manuscripts, through skills training of the local custodians.

Now that the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project has been operating for several years, it is broadening its focus beyond Timbuktu, to Arabic writing cultures elsewhere in Africa. A major aspect of this process is connecting with scholars working on ajami writing cultures in other parts of the Continent. Thus far the African Ajami network includes experts from Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa as well as Norway and Poland.

In 2008, the Project began researching local Ajami writing traditions, including Arabic-Afrikaans and jawi (Arabic-Malay). Saarah Jappie undertook a pilot study, surveying the general situation of Ajami cultures in Cape Town. This study included the cataloguing of a private library of a local Capetonian, Imam Manie Bassier. Work on this Ajami tradition is still in progress, with an exhibition and catalogue translation envisaged in the near future.

The Project also engages the African Calligraphies project which began with the calligraphy exhibition, *From Istanbul to Timbuktu: Ink Routes* and the workshops and academic seminar held in August 2009. One of the main aims of the exhibition and the events surrounding it was to highlight African Islamic calligraphies as part of broader Islamic art. This aim was particularly significant, given that African calligraphies are rarely included in dominant representations of Islamic calligraphic traditions. The next phase of the project will focus on supporting budding Islamic calligraphers in Africa. The Tombouctou Manuscripts Project team is also working on two main book projects. The first is the publication of the manuscript translations produced by Shahid Mathee, Ebrahiem Moos and other researchers affiliated with the project. The second project is the translation and publication of the seminal work *Ahmad Baba de Tombouctou: sa vie et son oeuvre* ('Ahmad Baba of Timbuktu: His life and works') written by Mahmoud Zouber. Hence, the subject of book history in Africa strongly informs the work of the Project and has become one of our main research themes. Thus, in addition to studying existing manuscripts, it is interested in exploring the contextual issues regarding manuscript production and culture in Africa which includes reading practices, the book trade, text circulation and literacy practices.