

# **The South Africa-Mali Timbuktu Project**

## **Utilizing Skills and Talents to Advance the African Renaissance**

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*The following is an address by President Thabo Mbeki of the Republic of South Africa at a South Africa-Mali Timbuktu Project fundraising dinner in Tshwane, South Africa on October 1, 2005 in the presence of President Amadou Toumani Toure of Mali and other distinguished guests from Mali, India, the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere. The South Africa-Mali Timbuktu Project is the first cultural project of The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). To assist the project (not a JPAS endorsement) you may contact: the Timbuktu Heritage ([www.timbuktuheritage.org](http://www.timbuktuheritage.org)), the Timbuktu Educational Foundation ([www.timbuktufoundation.org](http://www.timbuktufoundation.org)), or the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa ([www.northwestern.edu/isita](http://www.northwestern.edu/isita)).*

Thabo M. Mbeki is the [President](#) of the Republic of [South Africa](#), he holds a Master of [Economics](#) degree from the [University of Sussex](#). He succeeded [Nelson Mandela](#) as ANC president in December 1997 and as president of the Republic in June 1999 (inaugurated on [June 16](#)); and was reelected in [April 2004](#). President Mbeki is noted for heading the formation of [NEPAD](#) and the [African Union](#) and has played influential roles in brokering peace deals in [Rwanda](#), [Burundi](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#).

I would like to extend very special thanks to His Excellency President Toure for sacrificing other appointments to be with us tonight at this gala dinner. His presence here indicates not only his commitment to the success of the Timbuktu Manuscript Project, but also to the noble objective to unite the people of Africa to achieve the renaissance of our continent. Welcome Mr President, and many thanks for kindly responding to our request to join us here tonight.

The great African distances separate South Africa and Mali. The geographers say the distance between Bamako and Pretoria is 5789 km. Our colonization by different European powers added to this separation, seeming to suggest that it would be difficult for our countries and peoples to build meaningful relations of mutually beneficial cooperation between ourselves. [Yet] President Toure's presence among us and the work being done by our countries concerning the Timbuktu Manuscripts demonstrates that, to the contrary, we are well on course to the construction of strong bonds of cooperation among our countries and peoples.

As we grew up as young freedom fighters we were inspired among others by the great Malian leader and esteemed Member of the Order of the Companions of O.R. Tambo, Modibo Keita, a pioneer combatant for the renaissance of Africa. Under his leadership, and despite its own challenges of development, Mali emerged as one of the strongest supporters of our struggle for freedom, truly a fellow fighter for the liberation of South

Africa. The relations of solidarity established then serve today as the firm bedrock on which we are constructing a new partnership dedicated to the upliftment of both our peoples.

Esteemed guests, thank you very much for contributing so generously to making this event a success, you are making an important contribution in a tangible and demonstrable manner to give meaning to the pursuit of the goal of the African Renaissance. The Renaissance of Africa has to begin with an understanding of our past. Our history long predates the period of European colonialism. So we must reach into, understand and expound on the era when the great kingdoms of Africa flourished, engaged in internal and external long distance trade and produced scholars, philosophers, scientists, and literary figures of high repute.

For our continent to take its rightful place in the history of humanity we need to shatter the misconceptions about the history of our continent engendered by the ideologues of European colonialism. Essential to the colonial project was control and with control came erasure, denial and the falsification of African pre-colonial history. For instance, the *Collins Concise English Dictionary* still includes reference to Timbuktu as "any distant or outlandish place". As we know, outlandish can mean bizarre, peculiar, strange, eccentric, weird or odd. But for us Timbuktu is and will for ever remain a place of pride and affirmation of our African identity.

This confirms that we need to undertake, with a degree of urgency, a process of reclamation and assertion. We must contest the colonial denial of our history and we must initiate our own conversations and dialogues about our past. We need our own historians and our own scholars to interpret the history of our continent.

Our work in Timbuktu is a living example of this contemporary process of reclamation and reassertion of identity, history and of the rightful place of Africa's centers of civilization. This we owe to present and future generations in Africa and globally.

When I visited the Republic of Mali in November 2001, the then President, Dr. Alpha Konare, now the head of the African Union, invited me to conclude the trip with a visit to the historic city of Timbuktu. Our delegation was warmly received by the city's peoples who took us to view the ancient buildings that embody so much architectural ingenuity and originality. The Djingere-Ber and the Sankore mosques are truly astounding monuments to ancient African collective endeavor, planning and imagination.

At the Ahmed Baba Centre for Research and Documentation, now known as the Ahmed Baba Institute for Higher Learning and Islamic Research, we were shown ancient manuscripts which are without any doubt among the most important cultural treasures in Africa. These manuscripts debunk the myth that the tradition in Africa was always and only an oral tradition. The manuscripts point to the significance of the written tradition - a tradition that long predates the arrival of European colonizers on the soil of Africa.

Timbuktu represents very important dimensions of Africa's greatness and its contribution to the history of humanity. It is world renowned as a center of trade and a center of research and scholarship in the fields of science, mathematics, religion. Timbuktu produced and attracted artists, academics, politicians, religious scholars and poets.

Knowledge and knowledge production were revered. El Hasan ben Muhammed el-Wazzan-ez-Zayyati, also known as Leo Africanus, visited Timbuktu after it had passed its peak and still remarked on its peaceful people, its trade in salt, the use of gold as a medium of exchange, and goods imported from Europe. In 1526 he wrote: *"The rich king of Tombuto [Timbuktu] hath many plates and scepters of gold, some were of (the) weight (of) 1300 pounds. And he keeps a magnificent and well-furnished court - here are a great store of doctors, judges, priests and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king's expense – and hither are brought diverse manuscripts or written books out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandise."*

One of the leading contemporary scholars on the Timbuktu Manuscripts, John Hunwick ([www.johnhunwick.com](http://www.johnhunwick.com)) notes that these documents demonstrate that *"Many Africans could write their 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 and Swahili"*.

These inspirational and incredibly rich and textured manuscripts represent an important link to our own past, and are of inestimable value to the African Renaissance. However, as Kwesi Kwaa Prah ([kkprah@casas.co.za](mailto:kkprah@casas.co.za)) points out " *African archives are deteriorating at a fast pace*", and he notes " *In most of Africa it would appear that as the economic conditions deteriorate, the archives also suffer grievously. It is close to impossible to get people to care for archival materials in societies where daily bread is continuously in question*". So our fight against poverty and underdevelopment in Africa and globally is one that has innumerable positive spin-offs.

In Timbuktu we witnessed the valiant efforts of the people to protect the manuscripts from deterioration. Malian officials were immensely dedicated to the tasks of collection, conservation, and preservation of these documents for posterity. But they worked under difficult conditions and with a paucity of resources. Clearly there was a great need to create conditions conducive to the proper conservation and study of these important intellectual creations.

Unfortunately many of the manuscripts were in poor condition and in urgent need of conservation and restoration. Other documents were stored under conditions that were far from ideal. This reality was clear to all in our delegation.

Given the rudimentary facilities at the centre and the harsh Saharan desert environment, these manuscripts in the possession of the Ahmed Baba Centre, constituting one of the most extraordinary collections of medieval manuscripts in Africa if not the world, were unlikely to survive another 100 years under these conditions.

We had to do something. We were compelled by the richness of the past, the realities of the present and the imperatives of the African Renaissance to act decisively to help preserve the African archives in Timbuktu. This immense need to preserve the vast richness of our history led me to pledge to the President of Mali, the support of the South African government for their conservation efforts.

We in South Africa know how deafening silences about our history can be. Here in our own country, the apartheid regime locked away the evidence of the civilization of Mapungubwe and refused to allow independent research on the site for decades. Today we encourage such scholarship in an effort to unlock the liberating secrets of our pre-colonial history. Since this pledge in 2001, there have been several developments:

An inter-governmental agreement between South Africa and Mali was signed in 2002. The agreement expresses the two countries' commitment to undertake a government-to-government project aimed at conserving the manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Centre and at rebuilding the library and archival infrastructure of the Institute. Our commitment was based on the goal to build a sincere and productive collaboration between two African states. It is a practical illustration that our talk of an African Renaissance and NEPAD (<http://www.nepad.org/2005/files/home.php>) are not empty slogans or fanciful dreams.

In 2003, on Africa Day, in Johannesburg, President Toure and I formally launched the project. The project has been declared an official South African Presidential Project and has also been endorsed by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), as its first cultural project. A Trust Fund to raise funds from South African businesses and citizens for the conservation of the manuscripts and the building of a new library has been established, and the Development Bank of South Africa is responsible for managing the funds.

The first phase of the project to be undertaken has been the development and implementation of a training program for Malian conservationists and heritage professionals. Since 2002, the National Archives of South Africa, in collaboration with conservation specialists at the National Library and the Library of Parliament, has hosted three batches of trainees in South Africa.

Fieldwork has also been undertaken at the Ahmed Baba Center (<http://www.sum.uio.no/research/mali/timbuktu/cedrab/index.html>) in Timbuktu and it is very gratifying to note that, despite the problems with the infrastructure, the Malian conservators and managers of the center have worked mightily to apply the training received in South Africa in practice and to improve the condition of the manuscripts as much as possible within the constraints of the site.

In fact, just a few weeks ago five young Malian conservators returned to Mali after the third extended round of training at our National Archives. They spent 7 weeks in the country working with staff in the conservation departments of the National Archives in Pretoria, the National Library and the Library of Parliament in Cape Town; our conservators will travel to Mali this month to round off this phase of training in Timbuktu.

Currently we have an unprecedented exhibition of sixteen Malian manuscripts on show at the Standard Bank gallery in Johannesburg. The oldest manuscript dates to 1204. The manuscripts are on loan thanks to the gracious generosity of the Ahmed Baba Institute and the Malian government.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance provided by Dr. Dicko, director of the Ahmed Baba Institute from Timbuktu, in this regard, who is also present here tonight.

South African academics are now beginning to study the significance of specific manuscripts and develop contact with their colleagues in Mali and other parts of the continent. Much of this effort is centered at the University of Cape Town.

Recently the University hosted a Timbuktu workshop that brought together leading academics and researchers from Mali, South Africa and around the world. The workshop was another dimension of the broader South Africa-Mali initiative. We are keen that our researchers engage in sustained and professional studies on the fascinating contents of a range of subjects covered by the manuscripts.

There are essentially three major thrusts to the project: firstly to conserve the manuscripts as far as possible and to improve their physical conditions; secondly to rebuild the Ahmed Baba Centre on a new site so that physical conservation, access and scholarship can all flourish once more in Timbuktu; and, thirdly to promote academic study and public awareness of this great African intellectual treasure trove and so advance the objective of the African Renaissance.

A major point of focus of the project is the building of a new library for the Ahmad Baba Institute. South African and Malian professionals are now completing the planning phase. They are committed to planning and completing a building that reflects the history of the town and using technologies that are appropriate and effective in housing this great example of African intellectual production.

I must express my appreciation to Minister Pahad for spearheading the fund raising efforts. I would also like to thank members of the inter-ministerial committee, members of the Trust Fund and the Department of Arts and Culture, the National Archives and the National Library for all the immensely important work they have done on the project so far.

Our fund-raising drive for the project has met with a very positive response from the private sector and ordinary South Africans from all religious and cultural backgrounds. I must also thank everybody present here tonight for your generous contributions to making this project a success. Your efforts demonstrate in a very powerful way that Africans can and are helping Africans in the pursuit of the greater good.

Through our collective efforts we are solidifying the ties that bind Africans together. United in our ethno-racial, cultural and religious diversity, we are demonstrating to the world that we are utilizing our considerable skills and talents to advance the African Renaissance.

What all of you have demonstrated is that this project has moved far beyond a government to government initiative. It is now truly a people of South Africa to people of Mali initiative. And in making it a people to people initiative you have demonstrated the courage of conviction that says we are shattering the colonial myths and the silences about our past.

Through our collective actions, we are setting the tone of the new discourse and we are asserting an African identity and a sense of purpose, of place and history of the great cities and states of our continent. We are asserting our right to tell our own stories about our glorious history. And we do this to honor our past and claim our future.

