



With Love from Timbuktu

Adama Juldeh Munu discusses the importance of the ancient city of Timbuktu within Islamic history.

From here to Timbuktu

An old Sudanese proverb states that “Salt comes from the north, gold from the south and silver from the land of the Whites, but the Word of God, the famous things, histories and fairy tales, we only find them in Timbuktu.”*

Timbuktu has been shrouded in myth as a faraway city of great fortune and treasure. Most of us are familiar with the infamous saying ‘From here to Timbuktu’, showing the effort a person would need to achieve something. This saying is so embedded in popular culture that I find it unsurprising that the Oxford Dictionary uses it as an adjective to define “any distant or remote place”.

I wish to take you on a short journey across the free-flowing Niger River on the southern fringe of the Saharan desert to a city renowned for intercultural exchange between Africans and Arabs, a city filled with untold treasures for those who sought it. Perhaps, its greatest legacy was how it helped shape the West African region into an educational and spiritual centre, a magnet drawing towards it only the excellent.

Kingdom of faith

Founded in the 11th or 12th century, Timbuktu was a major city in the Mali Empire (1230-1600) which stretched from the West African coast to Old Ghana. Alongside the Ghana and Songhai Empires, it wielded great political power.

The Empire reached its peak under Muslim king, Mansa Musa I (1312-1337), whose reign became one of the most important and enlightening for Mali. Firstly, under his reign, Timbuktu was a place of great fortune. In 2012, Celebrity Net Worth ranked Mansa Musa as the richest man in history worth \$400 billion and with good reason too. Timbuktu held half of the world's gold supply and was part of a thriving salt and precious metal trade. It was an active trading centre along the Saharan trade route linking South Sahara to the Mediterranean and the Arab world.

Secondly, despite this great wealth at his disposal, Musa was known by his subjects and visitors alike as a devout and generous Muslim who used his wealth for the sake of Allah ﷻ. According to medieval historian Ibn Batutta, Musa, in the tradition of West

African kings, travelled in exuberance to perform Hajj in 1324CE (with as many as 14,000 slave girls according to Cairene historian Al-Maqrizi). But whilst stopping in Cairo, he did not hesitate in giving away so much gold to the people in the streets that the value of gold decreased by 25%, contributing to the ruin of the Egyptian economy for six years.

Musa would readily discard from his court any questionable practices contrary to the teachings of Islam. Ibn Battuta also records that a member of the Mamluk court, Ibn Amir Hajib, saw how devout Musa was in his prayers and recitation of the Qur'an, but observed the custom that if one of Musa's subjects had a beautiful daughter, she should offer herself to him without marriage. After Hajib advised Musa on the impermissibility of this action in Islam, Musa immediately abandoned this tradition.

Piety as well as power was an exemplary quality that Musa held. His love for Islam was not only seen in his generosity and charity, but also in his overseeing of the establishments of world class educational institutions. This led to an architectural renaissance which can still be seen in Timbuktu today.

From Makkah to Timbuktu

Many of us may be familiar with the infamous Djenn mosque in Djenn, which was a part of the Mali Empire. It is not only a popular African landmark and destination but also a world heritage site and the largest mud brick building in the world. Built in 1240 CE, many architects have branded the mosque as one of the greatest achievements of the Sudano-Sahelian architectural style. Going back further in time to 999 CE, we find the foundation laid to begin the construction of another architectural wonder, the Sankore University, one of the world's oldest universities and a contemporary of great schools, past and present, such as Oxford and the Sorbonne. Its achievements may not be as well-known as those of other Islamic universities, such as Al-Azhar in Cairo, but its dedication to different academic disciplines earned the pride of the international Black community as well as the Muslim community.

Construction completed sometime between 1325 and 1433 CE, during Musa's reign, Sankore University is located in the Sankore Mosque built by the Qadi of Timbuktu, Aqib ibn Mahmud. This indicates the emphasis laid on learning and the role education should play at the heart of the community, the best of places beloved to Allah ﷻ. A wealthy lady from the Mandike tribe, who is believed to be known by the name of Sankore, financed the construction of the university. According to other academics, Sankore means "people of knowledge".

During the 12th century alone, the university attracted 25,000 students from all over the world to the city, which had only 100,000 residents. Its high requirements in the admission process meant that many renowned students and scholars studied within its walls. An example is Ahmed Baba (1564-1627), who was the last chancellor of the University and wrote numerous books on various subjects, such as law, medicine, and mathematics. Baba's library alone contained 1,600 volumes. Ahmed Ben Gondola, who was a Qadi of Timbuktu and produced many great works on Maliki law, and Mohammed Kate, who authored 'Tarikh-el Fettach', the

first history book written by a Sudanese national (c.1517), owed much to the teachings at the university. Many scholars were both graduates of Sankore and other prestigious institutions in Fez, Cairo and Makkah. Timbuktu, in its heyday in the medieval period, commanded a great degree of respect as a place of authentic learning of Islamic sciences.

A will of words

One of the great testaments of Timbuktu is its volumes of historic and important manuscripts. We often hear the phrase 'Knowledge is Power' and, although the vast majority of us can accept that education is the key to success, it could be argued that in contemporary society wealth is seen to be the actual pinnacle of worldly achievement. For the people of Timbuktu, not only was the attainment of knowledge vital, but preserving it was just as crucial.

The process of utilising manuscripts was by no means a static one. Manuscripts which dealt with religious and secular topics, as well as commentaries on classical works, were often imported from North Africa, copied and transported to Cairo and Makkah. Scholars from the Islamic world would likewise take books into Timbuktu in what could be seen as a prototype for the World Wide Web!

There were scores of private libraries from amongst the elite and lower classes, particularly in the 16th century, and, subhan Allah, scores of libraries can still be found amongst families today. This is one of the key reasons why access to these manuscripts has been remarkably easy. It is estimated that there are 300,000 manuscripts in circulation amongst families and communities in Timbuktu and its surrounding areas.

This golden era was unfortunately brought to a standstill with the Moroccan invasion of the kingdom in 1591CE. Today there are many projects which aim to preserve these treasures of Timbuktu, such as the Ahmad Baba Centre and the Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library, and much is still being uncovered. However, many scholars of Islamic and African studies are left in awe by the wealth of information contained in Timbuktu's manuscripts, as they cover all areas of human interest. Dissemination of this information could very well change our perception of West African civilisation and rewrite history.

We couldn't take word for word the whole of the proverb stated earlier, but we can take away the very heart of what it professes: Timbuktu is a special place. Its legacy is unique on the African continent. It was renowned within the Islamic world as the place for anyone seeking an intellectual hijrah. Its institutions and works are a living legacy of its importance in Islamic history and inspiration for us all who must, according to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, seek knowledge.

** This saying is obviously a hyperbole as the Qur'an is the word of God and we find it all over the earth.*

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