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When Timbuktu Was the Paris of Islamic Intellectuals in Africa

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In popular imagination, the word Timbuktu is a trip of three syllables to the ends of the earth. Today this West African city is a slumbering and decrepit citadel at the southern edge of the Sahara, in Mali, one of the poorest countries in the world.

Yet it is here that some of the most astonishing developments in African intellectual history have been occurring. In recent years, thousands of medieval manuscripts that include poetry by women, legal reflections and innovative scientific treatises have come to light, reshaping ideas about African and Islamic civilizations. Yet even as this cache is being discovered, it is in danger of disappearing, as sand and other grit are abrading many of the aging texts, causing them to disintegrate.

"The manuscripts reveal that black Africa had literacy and intellectualism -- thus going beyond the mere notion of Africa as a continent of 'song and dance,'" John O. Hunwick, a scholar who has uncovered some of the writings, said in a recent interview.

Although this rich intellectual heritage is familiar to numerous Africans, many Westerners still believe that Africa had only an oral, nonliterate culture. Comments like those made by the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper in 1963 still resonate: "Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness."

In reality, Timbuktu was once a haven of high literacy. These manuscripts, some dating to the 14th century and written mostly in Arabic, show that medieval Timbuktu was a religious and cultural hub as well as a commercial crossroads on the trans-Saharan caravan route. Situated at the strategic point where the Sahara touches on the River Niger, it was the gateway for African goods bound for the

merchants of the Mediterranean, the courts of Europe and the larger Islamic world.

When the Renaissance was barely stirring in Europe, Timbuktu was already the center of a prolific written tradition. By the end of the 15th century, Timbuktu's 50,000 residents thrived on the commerce of gold, salt and slaves, and hundreds of students and scholars convened at the city's Sankoré mosque. There were countless Koranic schools and as many as 80 large private libraries. Wandering scholars were drawn to Timbuktu's manuscripts all the way from North Africa, Arabia and even Persia.

The bulk of these texts have remained buried for years in Timbuktu's mud homes. Many owners are the descendants of the skilled craftsman class, and the manuscripts often represent a family heritage passed on from generation to generation.

Mr. Hunwick, a professor of history and religion at Northwestern University who has spent 40 years doing research on Africa, came across piles of manuscripts in the musty trunks of a family library in 1999. They were part of a private collection of several thousand manuscripts, some more than 600 years old. While most were written in Arabic, others used Arabic letters to transcribe local tongues like Fulani and Songhay. Mr. Hunwick said he was awe-struck.

The collection was in the possession of descendants of Mahmoud Kati, a 16th-century scholar who, along with others, jotted intricate notes in the margins of his books. Occasionally Kati commented on the texts, but mostly his notes strayed to other topics, from weddings and funerals to floods and droughts. Of a meteor shower in August 1583, he wrote: "In the year 991 in God's month of Rajab the Goodly, after half the night had passed stars flew around the sky as if fire had been kindled in the whole sky -- east, west, north and south. It became a mighty flame lighting up the earth, and people were extremely disturbed about that. It continued until after dawn."

As early as 1967, Unesco recommended the creation of a manuscript conservation center in Timbuktu. Six years later, with financing from Kuwait, the Malian government opened the Ahmed Baba Center in the city, and it has been collecting manuscripts, acquiring more than 18,000 works so far.

"These amount to about 10 to 15 percent of the written potential in Timbuktu and its region," said Ali Ould Sidi, the chief of the city's small but active cultural affairs office. Some scholars believe there are up to one million manuscripts in Mali, about 100,000 of which are in the Timbuktu region. These texts -- possibly the most ancient to survive in sub-Saharan Africa -- offer a window into the ways black Muslim scholars thought and imagined the world around them over centuries.

Unesco designated Timbuktu as a "world patrimony" site in 1989, and the city has since received numerous conservation grants from American foundations and from the governments of Norway, South Africa and Luxemburg. After finding the manuscripts of the Kati collection, Mr. Hunwick became involved in an international effort to preserve and disseminate Timbuktu's written history, in the process creating the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa at Northwestern. Closer to home, last year the New Partnership for Africa's Development, based in Johannesburg, has announced plans for a multi-million-dollar Timbuktu initiative to benefit the manuscripts.

There are formidable obstacles, nonetheless. The texts are rotting inside their metal cases. While turning them over to experts might help preserve them, owners are extremely reluctant to let them go, since they represent personal family legacies.

Those that make it out of family trunks have other problems. Human handling by researchers and visitors, as well as a robust black market, are further chipping away at this historical trove. Chris Murphy, a Near East specialist at the Library of Congress who was a co-curator of an exhibition of Timbuktu manuscripts last summer, said in an interview that trafficking was now common practice. "Poverty is such that you can buy these for \$2 to \$5," he said. "Then they are taken to Switzerland, often, where their provenance will be forged. And they get moved to auction houses where they will be sold for up to \$1,000. Sometimes, they can even reach five figures." Often unaware of their bogus provenance, oil sheiks and university collections alike become potential clients.

Sean O'Fahey, a professor of Islamic African history at the University of Bergen, in Norway, who has worked extensively with European aid agencies across Africa, said that part of the problem in Mali, unlike such other African countries as the Sudan, is that most of the people who own these manuscripts cannot read them because they do not know Arabic. "So what you've got in Mali," he explained, "is a kind of break in the intellectual heritage." This gaping rift between past and present, he said, may prove to be the greatest obstacle to preserving Timbuktu's cultural legacy.

Photos: Medieval manuscripts, above, are found in many mud-walled homes in Timbuktu, Mali, where they are disintegrating. Left, the Ahmed Baba Center is preserving thousands of them in air-conditioned rooms. (Photographs by Associated Press)