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African Bibliophiles: Books and Libraries in Medieval Timbuktu

Abstract

The West African city of Timbuktu flourished as a center for Islamic scholarship from the 14th through the 16th century. The social structure of the city was based on wealth, with further stratification by degree of literacy, and expertise in interpreting Islamic legal texts. As a consequence, books and libraries evolved into blessed symbols of scholarship, wealth, and power. This study explores the history of books and libraries during the Golden Age of Timbuktu (1493--1591), followed by a discussion of the divergence of library practices in Timbuktu from those in the greater Islamic world of the time.

"Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, and silver from the country of the white men, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuctoo." Sudanese proverb¹

To many Western minds the word, "Timbuktu", connotes a far-flung, perhaps imaginary locale of indeterminate origin, employable in poetry and colorful expressions. This naiveté notwithstanding, the Sudanese proverb above aptly describes the prominence of Timbuktu in medieval West African and Sudanic history. Established on the rim of the Sahara Desert, it was bounded by the greatest empires in West African history. Timbuktu flourished as an autonomous center of trade, commerce, and scholarship, and was ruled by Islamic judges and scholars wielding the book and the pen as instruments of supreme power. Only the most learned could rule and books and libraries were the source of the requisite erudition the scholars clamored to attain. In this environment books and book collections became invaluable tools that defined the lives and aspirations of Timbuktu's elite.

Brief Historical Background

Timbuktu was founded by members of the Masufa branch of the Sanhaja (Berber) tribe around 1106 AD as a seasonal camp for

storing salt and other goods. For two centuries, Timbuktu persisted as a semi--permanent encampment, populated largely by Masufa and small pockets of Soninke, Malinke, Fulani, and other Sudanese peoples. As a result of its geographic position, Timbuktu eventually became a major trading center and caravan stop for Sudanese Muslims crossing the Sahara on route to Mecca for the hajj (pilgrimage). In the 14th century, significant numbers of Sudanese trader/scholars settled there, transforming the city into an emergent scholarly community.

Two significant rulers facilitated Timbuktu's rise to scholarly eminence, Mansa Musa and Askia Muhammad. Around 1324, Mansa Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire, visited Timbuktu upon returning from the hajj. Musa brought many non--African Muslims in his entourage and a new zeal for securing the future of Islam in his empire. He distributed Maliki² books of law and sent scholars to study Islamic law in the Moroccan city of Fez³. More than a century--and--a--half later, Askia Muhammad wrested control of the Mali Empire's successor, the Songhai Empire, in 1493. Askia Muhammad was celebrated in the written chronicles of Timbuktu as a patron of scholars, a true Muslim, and the fosterer of the Golden Age of Timbuktu. During this Golden Age Timbuktu's reputation flourished and spread throughout the Islamic world and beyond. However, by the end of the 16th century, the Songhai Empire and Askia Muhammad's family were in fractious disarray, which ultimately lead to the Moroccan invasion of 1591.

Following the Moroccan military victory, most scholars fled to nearby cities, were murdered, or imprisoned in Morocco. Imprisonment was the fate of most members of Timbuktu's preeminent scholarly families. The mass removal and exodus of scholars from Timbuktu reduced the level of scholarship to a low the city would never completely recover from, effectively ending the city's notable scholarly history.

Literacy and Books in Timbuktu

In the 16th century, Timbuktu housed as many as 150--180 maktabs (Qur'anic schools), where basic reading and recitation of the Qur'an were taught. The schools had an estimated peak enrollment of 4,000--5,000⁴; this number includes the transitory population of students from neighboring cities and surrounding nomadic tribes. Basic literacy skills were abundant, but only a select few (200--300 individuals) drawn from a small number of wealthy families were able to attain the status of ulama (scholars).⁵

The level of scholarship achieved by the ulama of Timbuktu became well known in many parts of the Muslim world. In the Tarikh al--Sudan, 'Abd al--Rahman ibn 'Abd Allah al--Sadi included an anecdote related by Sidi Yahya in the 15th century. Yahya noted: "Sidi 'abd al--Rahman al--Tamimi came from the Hijaz. He settled in Timbuktu, and realized that it was full of

Sudanese fuqaha. When he saw that they surpassed him in [the knowledge of] fiqh [jurisprudence] he traveled to fas [fes] to study fiqh, and then returned to Timbuktu to settle there."⁶ Sidi Yahya's account of the Arabian traveler emphasized that the highest levels of scholarly efforts in Timbuktu matched, and in some cases, surpassed their brethren in the greater Islamic world.

In Timbuktu, literacy and books transcended scholarly value, and symbolized wealth, power, and baraka (blessings), as well as an efficient means of transmitting information. The creation and importation of books was a predominant concern for the literati of Timbuktu. Strangers from distant lands were feted like royalty in the hopes that scholars could gain access to the visitors' books and copy them. Furthermore, the pious, scholarly society in Timbuktu acknowledged few outlets for displaying wealth, most notably: expanding one's business, building or refurbishing mosques, patronizing scholars, furnishing one's home, and purchasing and collecting books. In the historical chronicles of Timbuktu, the acquisition of books is mentioned more often than any other display of wealth, including the building and refurbishment of mosques. While the number of mosques was finite, the number of books was not, leaving books as a continual means for spending wealth. Moreover, the scholars were avid bibliophiles, searching for and clamoring to possess (or compose) great scholarly works.

The importation of books into Timbuktu was brisk and highly regarded, Leo Africanus, a 16th--century traveler to Timbuktu, observed: "Here are great stores of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king's cost and charges. And hither are brought diuers manuscripts or written bookes out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandize."⁷ On any list of principal trade items, paper and books are usually noted.

The flow of books into Timbuktu naturally outpaced the number of books Timbuktu exported to the outside world, nonetheless, many notable works owned or penned by Sudanese scholars were traded north. Ahmad Baba, the preeminent scholar of Timbuktu, wrote more than 40 works including a biographical dictionary of Maliki fuqaha entitled Nayl al--ibtihaj bi--tatriz al--Dibaj, often referred to simply as the Nayl al--ibtihaj. This work gained popularity throughout the Maghrib (North Africa) and reached every part of the Maliki Muslim world.

Books from the general body of Islamic knowledge were common, but as in all Muslim societies the Qur'an was the most common and most revered book available. Literati as well as the illiterate kept the Qur'an in their households. Still, it was a great occasion when a new copy was commissioned or donated to a mosque. In the Tarikh as--Sudan it is noted that Askiya al--hajj Muhammad endowed to the Great Mosque a chest containing sixty juz (parts) of the Qur'an or two complete copies of the Qur'an broken

into thirty juz each. The Tarikh as--Sudan further notes that in 1611--12 the worn century old Qur'ans, endowed by Askia al--hajj Muhammad, were replaced by the merchant, al--hajj Ali b. Salim b. Ubayda al--Misrati, with a newly commissioned set.⁸ Al--Sadi's mention of these events emphasizes the pious act.

In the Tarikh al--Fattash, Kati describes the Songhai ruler Askia Dawud as: "A king held in awe, eloquent, skilful in his governance, generous, merry, liberal...he had scribes copy manuscripts for him, and often offered these works as gifts to scholars."⁹ Giving books to scholars was regarded as a noble act. Through the generosity of Askia Dawud, Mahmud Kati, was able to purchase a rare, imported copy of Muhammad ibn Yaqub al--Firuzabadi's al--Qamus al--muhit at the enormous sum of 80 mithqals.¹⁰ This amount was equal to the purchase of two horses and totaled roughly 12 ounces of gold.

Bookmaking

Manuscripts were plentiful in Timbuktu and the need for copying continual, affording students the opportunity to earn a living during their studies. While copying texts, students were familiarized with the works of their teachers and those of other scholars. Being a copyist was not considered a distinguished position, nonetheless, a copyist had to achieve and maintain a

high degree of skill to accurately transcribe religious texts especially the Qur'an.

The process of commissioning and completing a manuscript was quite laborious and expensive in Timbuktu. The task required several weeks or even months to complete, all of which was determined by the extent of the volume(s) and the opulence of the calligraphy employed. The colophons of six volumes of a 16th-century copy of Ibn Sida's work al--Muhkam wa--al--muhit al--a'zamfi al--lughah describe in detail the schedule of payment and dates of completion for copies of the work. These rather brief notes provide valuable insight into the professional copying network in Timbuktu. For instance, a full--time copyist, Muhammad ibn Sunbir, required 23 days to copy volumes 17 and 18 of the work, totaling 179 folios. Each page contained 19 lines of text, giving this copyist an average of 7.5 folios or 285 lines of text completed per day. Muhammad b. Andudd required an additional 19 days to vocalize (add vowels for proper pronunciation) these same two volumes at a rate of roughly 9 folios per day or nearly 300 lines of text.¹¹

For his labors a copyist was usually remunerated one--mithqal per month and supplied with the requisite leaves of paper to complete his work. According to Saad, besides a one--mithqal charge for a month's worth of copying: "An additional half a mithqal had to be expended for remunerating a literatus, usually acquainted with the subject matter, who would proof--read the

manuscript and correct its errors. Since paper was imported from North Africa and Egypt, its cost must have been great, and we are inclined to believe that any large volume cost five mithqals or more."¹²

The cost of copying a set of books was enormous; Hunwick suggests that the complete set of the Muhkam totaled as much as 21 mithqals or 3.15 oz of gold in labor alone.¹³ But no matter how costly local copying may have been, it was still far less expensive than purchasing most imported books. The 80 mithqals price paid by Mahmud Kati for the imported copy of the Qamus is an extreme example of high-priced imported books, but a single well-worn volume of an imported work titled Sharh al-ahkam cost Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muhammad 4 1/6 mithqals.¹⁴

Libraries in Timbuktu

Reliable figures concerning the size and scope of libraries in Timbuktu are scarce, however, the historical chronicles of Timbuktu and other sources provide a glimpse of a handful of collections. Al-Hashtuki quotes Ahmad Baba's comment about his library seized by the Moroccans: "I had the smallest library of any of my kin, and they seized 1,600 volumes."¹⁵ Baba's personal collection was extensive and valuable, and was completely dispersed to Morocco. To this day, works from the libraries of the Aqit, And-Agh-Muhammad, and other scholarly families of

Timbuktu can be found in museums and rare book collections throughout the Maghrib.

Another documented library was that of Ahmad Umar. He took great pride in copying and annotating the works himself. He left behind nearly 700 volumes upon his death.¹⁶ Other evidence of the scope of libraries is based upon works cited by Timbuktu scholars. Ahmad ibn And--Agh--Muhammad produced a work on grammar entitled al--Futuh al Qayumiya in which he cited no less than 40 grammatical works throughout his treatise. Likewise, Ahmad Baba's Kifayat al--Muhtaj drew from 23 Maliki biographical sources.¹⁷ Baba and And--Agh--Muhammad's remarkable works are a testament to both the depth and diversity of the book collections they had access to in Timbuktu.

Ahmad Baba's beloved teacher, Muhammad Baghayogho, also possessed an extensive library, but the number of volumes he possessed is unknown and was in constant flux by any account. In the Nayl al--ibtihaj Ahmad Baba describes Baghayogho's library collection and his liberality in lending books from his stock:

Add to this his love of learning and his devotion to teaching and study, his love for men of learning and his own total humility, the aid which he gave scholars and the trouble he took for them, giving out the rarest and most precious of his books in all subjects and never asking for them again whatever the circumstances

might be. Thus it was that he lost a [large] portion of his books - may God shower His beneficence upon him for this! Sometimes a student would come to the door of his house and send him a note stating the title of the book he wanted and he would get it out of his library and send it to the student without even knowing his name. In this matter he was truly astonishing, doing this for the sake of God, despite the love he had for books and the effort he spent to acquire them by purchase or copying. I came to him one day asking for books on grammar and he searched his house and gave me all he could come across.¹⁸

Baba's astonishment is a tribute to Muhammad Baghayogho and his extraordinary willingness to disperse his library voluntarily.

The libraries of Muhammad Baghayogho, and the other scholars mentioned above, represent only a tiny fraction of the collections that existed during the 16th--century. However, they encompass the entirety of documented book collections from this era. The historical chronicles of Timbuktu and other sources usually mention the city's book collections with a mixture of awe and allusion, but divulge little detail concerning their actual size and scope.

Libraries in Timbuktu vs. the Greater Muslim World

As Timbuktu reached the height of its Golden Age the major centers of the Muslim world were developing some of the largest and most diverse public library collections of the medieval period. The majority of Muslim libraries maintained a tradition of open access to scholars from around the world. Shafi briefly describes a typical medieval Arab library:

Free access to books for all was the sine qua non of the Arab libraries, where facilities were provided hardly surpassed even in modern libraries. Besides the freedom to use and liberal loan of books, libraries provided free supply of stationery and gave general permission for copying out books. Needy students were supplied, free of cost, copies made by the library copyists, and pecuniary help was given to the poor and deserving students working in libraries.¹⁹

Virtually every mosque possessed a library of some size within its confines or nearby. Many larger mosques held multiple libraries, particularly those with affiliated colleges. Prominent mosques possessing multiple libraries included the Masjid Haram in Mecca, the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Morocco, the Zaytuna Mosque in Tunis and Al--Azhar in Cairo. Al--Azhar possessed one of the

most diverse manuscript collections in the medieval Muslim world, numbering in the tens of thousands.

From biographical works, such as Ahmad Baba's Nayl al--ibtihaj, it is clear that many of Timbuktu's scholars studied in the various mosques mentioned above. These scholars undoubtedly made use of the vast mosque libraries in the Muslim population centers. Egypt was especially influential, hosting countless Sudanese scholars. Hunwick contends that studies of 16th--century chains of scholarly communication show a strong relationship between Timbuktu and Egypt as well as Mecca.²⁰ Egypt was the preeminent center of Islamic scholarship at the time and Cairo overflowed with mosque libraries.

Interestingly, there is no evidence of the existence of open access public libraries in medieval Timbuktu. On the contrary, the libraries of Timbuktu seem to have all been private collections of individual scholars or families. This dichotomy with the greater Islamic world raises many questions. Some have argued that the lack of the endowment institution known as waqf²¹, or habus (in North Africa), in the Sudanic societal structure resulted in the absence of colleges and public libraries in Timbuktu.²² Traditionally a library waqf paid for new book purchases, stationary, a librarian's salary, and in some cases, lodging for students as well as other expenses. The institution of waqf was not deeply imbedded in Sudanese society, yet the concept was not foreign in Timbuktu and the Songhai

Empire though. Askia al--hajj Muhammad was known to have initiated a waqf in Medina in order to preserve a few gardens for Sudanese pilgrims on hajj. Moreover, as previously mentioned he commissioned and endowed two full Qur'ans (60 juz) to the Great Mosque in Timbuktu.

Likewise, Askia Dawud was known to be a great benefactor of scholars, commissioning books and employing tutors from the ranks of the ulama. The wealthy patrons of Timbuktu clamored to spend money on community projects, with an eye towards increasing their baraka (blessings). So despite the absence of a formal waqf, funds were available and commonly used for public projects. It is reasonable to deduce that perhaps public libraries in Timbuktu could have developed without the institution of waqf.

In the Tarikh al-Fattash, Askia Dawud is credited with establishing at least one library in the Songhai capital Gao.²³ It is unclear who had access to this library and how extensive it was. In fact, the library was most likely Dawud's own collection, restricted to his royal entourage and favored scholars. Regardless, there exists no evidence supporting royally funded libraries in Timbuktu. Certainly the historical chronicles would have mentioned them since they mention the underwriting of single manuscripts. The preferred form of patronage appears to have been bolstering the book collections of individual scholars rather than establishing public libraries.

Timbuktu's history and societal structure hold the answer to the rationale favoring private over public libraries. The very remoteness of Timbuktu, especially early on in its development, contributed to the staunch private library tradition. The austere displays of wealth permitted in the close--knit pious community, and the inability to acquire new books on demand created an environment of acute bibliophilism. Despite their eventual broader contact with the greater Islamic world, the literati of Timbuktu held fast to the private library tradition of their forefathers.

Ironically, further support of private libraries in Timbuktu likely stemmed from the exposure of its scholars to public libraries and librarians abroad. Historically only scholars of esteem were appointed as librarians of mosque libraries and the position was held in high regard. Concerning librarians in medieval Baghdad, Mackensen notes: "They were figures important in the society of their time and often at court, members, rather than mere servants, of the cultured and learned groups which gathered in the libraries".²⁴ Although Mackensen refers specifically to librarians in Baghdad, the description above applies to librarians in the major medieval cities of the Muslim world. The historical records of Timbuktu hold in the highest esteem those scholars with large book collections. By retaining a large private collection, a scholar gained respect and renown similar to librarians abroad.

The most compelling argument against public libraries in Timbuktu stems from a social structure that simply made them unnecessary. In various parts of the Islamic world waqfs and other instruments of social equity allowed students of modest means to rise up the social and scholarly ladder of achievement. Unfortunately, in Timbuktu the body of ulama was drawn exclusively from the city's wealthiest families. With the exception of a handful of apprentices called alfas²⁵, there were no opportunities for the lower classes to join the scholarly elite. It was rare even for financially--assisted alfas to join the ulama or become anything more than enthusiastic and respected amateurs. Therefore, public libraries were not necessary when membership in the ulama was restricted to the wealthy. Only they were literate enough to read most of the erudite works available in the libraries of the Muslim world.

The number of ulama available to take advantage of public libraries was relatively small. The fully--qualified ulama of Timbuktu were a tight--knit community never numbering more than 200--300 at any particular time; they were concentrated in discrete quarters and mosques of the city. With the exception of special lectures given in the main mosques, the vast majority of instruction occurred in one--on--one or small group settings at the residence of a scholar. The scholars desired quick and easy access to reference materials and other works with which they had familiarity. Virtually every mosque in Timbuktu would have had

to possess a sizeable manuscript collection in order to supplant the private libraries.

The tight--knit community of scholars lent books between one another; Muhammad Baghayogho, as we have seen, lent out countless books. Ahmad Baba, his biographer, chose to emphasize the fact that he never asked for the return of books he lent out over the act of lending books; Baba placed no emphasis on the act of Baghayogho merely lending books. This implies that it was rare to be so liberal in giving books away, but not unusual for a scholar to lend books. This environment of collegiality, combined with the mitigating social factors and biases argued above, allowed the scholars of Timbuktu to hold to their traditions, ignoring the public library model of the greater Islamic world.

Conclusion

Timbuktu was able to foster an abode of Islamic learning for several centuries, in particular during its 16th--century Golden Age. The elite residents of Timbuktu placed supreme importance on literacy; the effect was a society ruled by scholars, and a widespread practice of writing and collecting books. Books allowed for an initially isolated community to develop into a scholarly center and, over time, incorporate itself into the greater Muslim world, which contributed to the corpus of Islamic literature.

Despite the scholarly contacts with the greater Muslim world, Timbuktu's library traditions remained unchanged. Public libraries never took root; the scholars favoring privately--owned collections. Due largely in part to historical precedence and societal structure, the libraries of Timbuktu remained in private hands until the Moroccan invasion in the late 16th century.

This study is a modest beginning to the more extensive research necessary to uncover further evidence of Timbuktu's book culture. The dichotomy between library traditions in Timbuktu and the greater Islamic world needs to be fleshed out to prove or disprove the theories introduced in this study. Eventually, a more complete picture of Timbuktu's bibliophiles and their unique contributions to Islamic culture may emerge.

Notes

¹ Felix Dubois, Timbuctoo the Mysterious, ed. and trans. by Diana White (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 276.

² Within the Islamic legal structure there are several schools of jurisprudential thought. The major schools of Sunni Islam are Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki and Shafi, all named after their founders. The Maliki School is dominant in North Africa and the Sudanic region.

³ Al--Umari, Ibn Fadl Allah, "Al--Umari," In N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, eds. and trans., Corpus of early Arabic sources for West African history (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 268--9.

⁴ Elias N. Saad, Social history of Timbuktu: the role of Muslim scholars and notables, 1400--1900 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 89--90.

⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁶ Nehemia Levtzion, Ancient Ghana and Mali (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1980), 202.

⁷ Leo Africanus, A geographical historie of Africa (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 288.

⁸ 'Abd al--Rahman ibn 'Abd Allah Al--Sadi, Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al--Sadi's Tarikh al--Sudan down to 1613 and other contemporary documents, ed. and trans. by John O. Hunwick (Boston: Brill, 1999), 83.

⁹ Translation of French. Mahmud Kati, Tarikh el--Fettach, ed. and trans. by M. Delafosse and O. Houdas (Paris: Adrien--Maisonneuve, 1964), 177.

¹⁰ Ibid., 200. Mithqals were a measurement of gold weight that varied between regions. In Songhai 1 mithqal = approximately 4.25g of gold.

¹¹ John O. Hunwick, "West African Arabic Manuscript Colophons II: A sixteenth--century Timbuktu copy of the Muhkam of Ibn Sida," Bulletin D'Information (Fontes Historiae Africanae) 9/10 (1984--5): 53.

¹² Saad, "Social History of Timbuktu," 80. Hunwick also traced watermarks on Timbuktu manuscript leaves to a mix of European locales, notably Messina, Italy and others from northeastern France, most likely Normandy; John O. Hunwick, "West African

Arabic Manuscript Colophons I: Askia Muhammad Bani's copy of the Risala of ibn Abi Zayd," Bulletin D'Information (Fontes Historiae Africanae) 7/8 (1982-3): 53.

¹³ Hunwick, "West African Arabic Manuscript Colophons," 53.

¹⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵ Muhammad al--Saghir b. al hajj Muhammad b. Al--Ifrani, "Al--Ifrani's account of the Sa'dian conquest of Songhay," In John O. Hunwick, ed. and trans., Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al--Sadi's Tarikh al--Sudan down to 1613 and other contemporary documents (Boston: Brill, 1999), 315.

¹⁶ Al--Sadi, "Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire," 52.

¹⁷ Saad, "Social History of Timbuktu," 79.

¹⁸ John O. Hunwick, "A contribution to the study of Islamic teaching traditions in West Africa: the career of Muhammad Baghayogho 930/1523--4--1002/1594," Islam Et Societes Au Sud Du Sahara 4 (1990): 156.

¹⁹ Muhammad Shafi, "Libraries and learning in the Muslim world," Pakistan Library Review 3 (1961): 35.

²⁰ John O. Hunwick, "Further Light on Ahmad Baba al-Tinbukti," Research Bulletin--Centre of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan 2--3 (1966--7): 25.

²¹ A waqf as defined by Sibai is "a pious endowment whose intended beneficiary was the Muslim community at large...used by Muslims to provide enrichment and upkeep of various institutions including mosques and their libraries". See Mohamed Makki Sibai, Mosque libraries, an historical study (London: Mansell, 1987), 92--3.

²² For a discussion on the lack of a waqf tradition in the Sudan See-- John O. Hunwick, "Translator's Introduction," In 'Abd al--Rahman ibn 'Abd Allah Al-Sadi, Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al--Sadi's Tarikh al--Sudan down to 1613 and other contemporary documents (Boston: Brill, 1999), 1x.

²³ Kati, "Tarikh el-Fettach", 177.

²⁴ Ruth Stelhorn Mackensen, "Four great libraries of Medieval Baghdad," Library Quarterly 2 (1932): 281.

²⁵ Alfas were a small group of men financially assisted through apprenticeships as tailors and by patrons to engage in higher scholarly pursuits. Although they had better opportunities and

more respect than most, they never reached the upper echelons of scholarly society. See Saad, "Social History of Timbuktu," for a further examination of the role of the alfas.