

MALI

Timbuktu manuscripts, evidence of Africa's glorious past

It has been said that Black Africa had no written tradition. But an exciting find in Timbuktu has uncovered thousands of manuscripts dating from the 13th and 14th centuries, pointing to the great libraries of Timbuktu where Western scholars travelled to study. **Pusch Commey** reports.

The Timbuktu manuscripts showcase a diverse and rich African culture and scientific knowledge. In what has been described as spectacular, the manuscripts incorporate subjects such as architecture, cultural tradition, astrology, science, economics, geography and mathematics.

The Arabic manuscripts (although some are written in local indigenous languages) are housed at the Baba Ahmed Institute and a good portion was kept by different families of ancient scholars.

Others have been found at the Sankore Mosque and the Gingery-Ber Mosque. Some of the scripts have gold leaf on the side, the same technology applied in Christian monasteries of Europe where copies of the Bible were decorated in gold.

Timbuktu, the northern city of Mali on the edge of the Sahara desert, was a great centre of learning where the region's intellectuals and scholars studied at the Sankore University (now turned into a mosque).

According to historians, the city's name was a thorn in the West's conscience, as Timbuktu was synonymous with wealth, unparalleled with anything seen in Africa.

The town had a flourishing trade in gold, and its merchants sold their gold in Europe and the Middle East in exchange for salt and other valuable goods. The period between 1350 and 1650 was called the "golden age" of Timbuktu.

Scholars from the 12th and 19th centuries made use of the written word from Timbuktu to guide leaders of multi-ethnic states that spanned vast areas of Africa. Their writings in Arabic were influenced by traditional African thought and Islamic faith.

At its height, the University of Timbuktu

enrolled 25,000 students and incorporated many cities with scholars from Europe. It had 180 Koranic schools and camps in the desert. This heritage is recorded in over 700,000 manuscripts.

"I believe the cultural legacy of Timbuktu represents the missing link in Africa," says Noel Brown, president of the Friends of the United Nations who doubles as a member of the Timbuktu Heritage Advisory Board. "We need to engage in efforts to restore the libraries of Timbuktu as they have with the library of Alexandria. All young Africans will then flock to Timbuktu to learn their history and culture."

Dr Graham Dominy, head of the South African National Archives who gave an invaluable insight into these manuscripts, has said that in the 12th century, the great Emperor of Mali, Mansa Musa, stopped in Cairo on his way to Mecca carrying jewellery, clothes and gold. Traders could not believe the amount of gold his caravan was carrying.

After the Emperor's visit, to some traders and more especially to Westerners, Timbuktu became a mythical and remote place to reach with unheard of secrets of wealth.

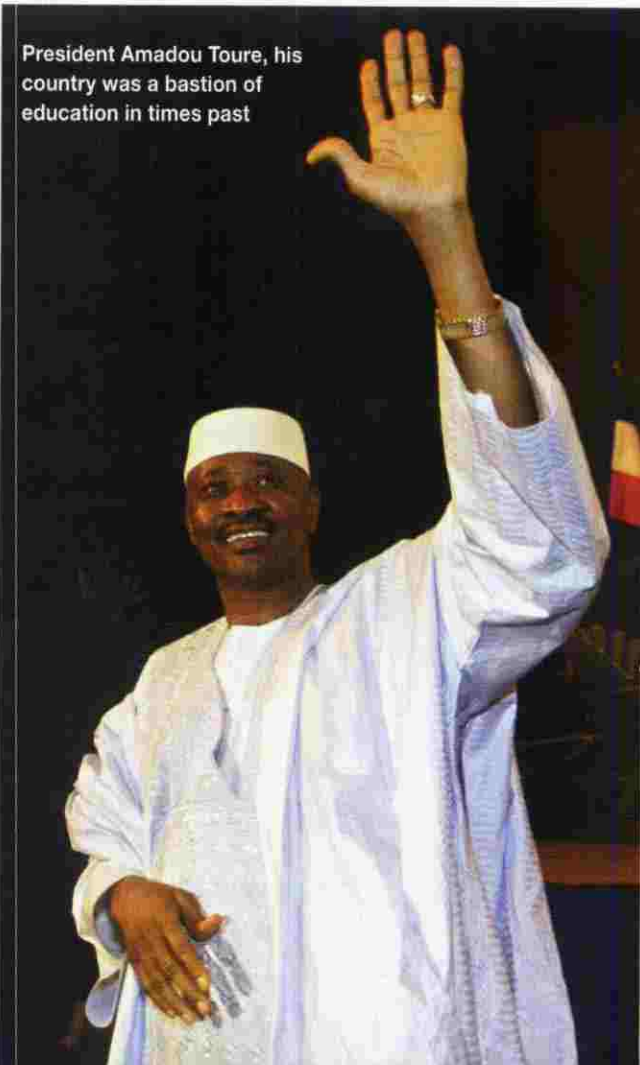
But, Timbuktu was in fact a reality for Africans. African scholars from the region knew about the city's wealth and rich heritage and made a conscious effort to

preserve documents for posterity.

The scripts further consolidated the continent's long-held belief that Africans were literate long before Westerners came to colonise the continent.

"Africans of the region were taking the Arabic script and writing their own local languages down, so they were literate," says

President Amadou Toure, his country was a bastion of education in times past



JOEL SACRET/AP

Dominy. "The Mali scripts are now destroying the myth that Africans were illiterate. There is proof."

South Africa has moved with gusto to help preserve these treasures of African pride. As part of an African Renaissance project, it has committed R36 million rands to the preservation of the Timbuktu scripts.

President Thabo Mbeki described it as money well spent as he made the announcement at a colourful Africa Day celebration in Johannesburg on 25 May when the manuscripts were unveiled. The medieval scripts have now been adopted by South Africa as a "Presidential Project" which is coordinated by the Presidency and the Department of Arts and Culture through the National Archives in Pretoria.

The scripts have been registered as the first official NEPAD cultural project, following an agreement between Mali and South Africa that empowered Pretoria to lend support and expertise to Mali to preserve the scripts.

As a gesture of goodwill, Mbeki, the outgoing African Union chairperson, presented an Islamic prayer book in Afrikaans written in Arabic script to his Malian counterpart, President Amadou Toumani Toure, during the celebrations. The prayer book was discovered in Cape Town together with a French version of the "Deeds of Trust".

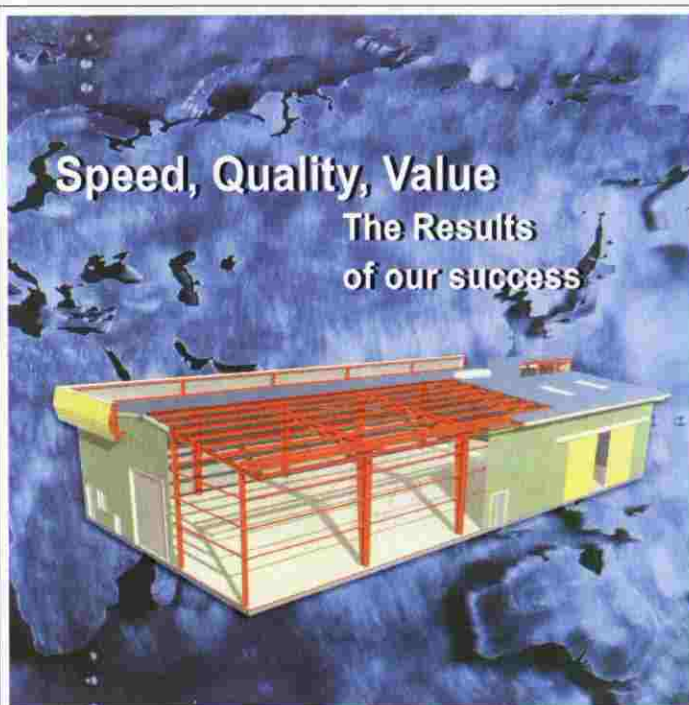
"Afrikaans was written in Cape Town," explained Dr Dominy. "And the first Afrikaans was written in Arabic, not in Western script, something the Afrikaners under apartheid tried to hide."

In terms of the South Africa-Mali agreement, Pretoria will assist in the building of a library that will have the necessary technology to preserve the manuscripts. The two countries have also launched a "Trust Fund for the Timbuktu Manuscripts", and have called on the public to donate funds for the preservation of the African treasure.

South Africa's Department of Arts and Culture is currently training two Malians on the preservation of the manuscripts, while two more will be trained later in the year.

UNESCO has declared Timbuktu a World Heritage Site, and the preservation of the manuscripts will add great value to the city.

The manuscripts have certainly emerged as a significant triumph in the search for the truth in Africa's distorted history and illustrates a literate continent of advanced people long before the invasion by Europeans. ■ **NA**



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