

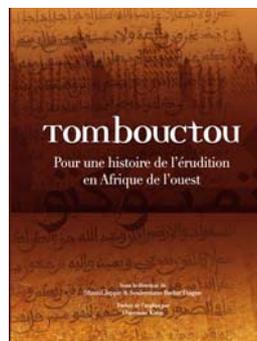
## Timbuktu: The Beginning of a New Era in Africa's Quest for its Past

**T**he *Meanings of Timbuktu* is one of the remarkable scholarly history books that are indispensable to any serious study of Africa's past, especially in the areas of popular culture, intellectual and scientific production in pre-colonial Africa. It is a book that all lovers of Africa would want to have on their bookshelves.

Co-published by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), this collection from the ancient libraries of Timbuktu (Mali), edited by Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Shamil Jeppie, has received great public attention since the publication of its English version in 2008. The public presentation of the French version took place at CODESRIA headquarters in Dakar on 3 May 2012. Dr Ebrima Sall, CODESRIA Executive Secretary, underscored the importance of the *Timbuktu* collections to research on African history. Dr Sall emphasised that this historic event provided a renewed opportunity for members of the African social science research community, the African academia at large, decision-makers and the general public to commend this landmark research production which not only uncovers a vital aspect of Africa's rich intellectual history, but also serves as an eye opener to new research prospects in the study of Africa's history.

According to Temba Masilela, Deputy CEO of South Africa's Human Science Research Council (HSRC) *The Meanings of Timbuktu* sprouted from the common desire of different African nations to come together in order to unearth a great chunk of the continent's past, a past which is preserved in ancient manuscripts kept in West Africa. The book, which is the product of a collaborative work between the African Union, the Republic of Mali and South Africa, has become not only an inspiration but also an invitation to a stronger Pan-African transnational collaboration between researchers to engage in a wholesale investigation and dissemination of Africa's past. More importantly, the success of this historic project has testified to the abundance of high level intellectual capacity that obtains in Africa, even right from the ancient times.

**Abdoulaye Diallo**  
Bilingual Editor  
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Two renowned African intellectuals, Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Senegal) and Shamil Jeppie (South Africa), took on the heavy responsibility of editing this embodiment of African intellectual creativity, containing contributions from Mali, Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, Mauritania, Morocco, Tanzania, etc., while Ousmane Kane undertook the equally heavy task of translating the English version – *The Meanings of Timbuktu* – into French – *Tombouctou: Pour une histoire de l'érudition en Afrique de l'Ouest*. The contributors and editors waded through numerous ancient documents, most of which are written in Arabic. This is no doubt an onerous task. Another great challenge was the fact that a very substantial part of the material, dating as far back as the thirteenth century, had been kept in thousands of private libraries, and underground vaults, mud homes and desert caves in and around the city of Timbuktu.

The commitment of these great intellectuals to such a challenging project, therefore, demonstrates their strong desire and the needed drive to circumvent the various obstacles that are in the way of conducting a holistic investigation of Africa intellectual past; one that transcends linguistic and geographic limitations.

Boubacar Barry of Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) applauded the resolve of these prominent members of the social science community who were not deterred by enormous challenges they faced in their bid to restore the fragmented nature of knowledge production in Africa, as a prerequisite to building a strong historical basis for the continent's young and future generations.

According to Hamady Bocoum, Director of Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN-UCAD), Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, and the contributors of *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, have really succeeded in a their commendable task of compiling, translating and disseminating ancient knowledge, thereby contributing to building the foundations of 'a new knowledge library for a new Africa'. He acknowledged that the

## CODESRIA Reports

book has taken the practice of preserving important cultural data on Africa to a higher level and through the project, these scholars have strengthened Timbuktu's significance as an invaluable World Heritage.

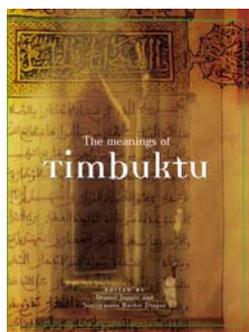
*The Meanings of Timbuktu* has demonstrated, once again, what African intellectuals are capable of doing when they come together - revisiting the history of the continent with a view to correcting fallacies and filling loopholes that are the result of a long running colonialist policy of intellectual fragmentation and disconnection between Africa's ancient modes of knowledge production and contemporary West-driven education. Making a *tabula rasa* of Africa's intellectual history was one of the main components of the colonial enterprise. The erroneous assertion that Africans were intellectually inexistent before the advent of colonialism, just as a way of legitimizing the subjugation and enslavement of Africans should be discouraged. This is what *The Meanings of Timbuktu* symbolizes. In the words of some African intellectuals like Mudimbe, the 'colonial library' was imposed upon Africans through the destruction of 'treasures of learning' and intellectual centers such as Timbuktu, also known as 'The City of the 333 Saints'. Now, the revival of these centers has begun through this publication, and many more are still coming.

*The Meanings of Timbuktu* has come to steer to the right direction Africa's intellectual orientation toward its history in order to scientifically repair the on-going damage stemming from the colonial enterprise which, as stated before, aimed at the permanent intellectual disconnection of the African from his past.

To Amadou Makhtar Mbow, former Director General of UNESCO, the initiative to produce this book is a continuation of an intellectual struggle which started in the early days of the independence of African nations. According to him, the first generation of African intellectuals had long strived to put a spotlight on a truly rich African history which existed far before colonization. As could be seen in the establishment of intellectual collections such as L'Ecole Historique du Sénégal in the early 1960s. Boubacar Barry of Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) described the book as a major intellectual contribution to the restoration of Africa's history through its focus on West Africa's endogenous knowledge.

The city of Timbuktu is undoubtedly the principal centre of traditional knowledge production in West Africa dating from the thirteenth century, predating colonial incursion and domination. With such a historic stature, Timbuktu has come to be the metaphor of the African intellectual system, as the city has been the depository of major manuscripts in which the rich history of the continent has been preserved. Just like Walata, Gao or Kidal, Timbuktu has been a cultural crossroads since its foundation by Touareg nomads in the early twelfth century. It served as a meeting point for people from Northern and sub-Saharan Africa. According to Hamady Bocoum, Director of IFAN-UCAD, the first mosque in sub-Saharan Africa was built in Timbuktu by the great King Kanka Musa. The mosque also provided a good platform for intellectual discussions which eventually led to the development of the city as a main knowledge center in Africa, as conveyed in various documents such as the Sudanese Chronicles.

In his analysis of *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Idrissa Ba, also of the Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, underlined the book's purpose of projecting the important cultural hybridization which took place in the ancient city. As it developed in the book, Timbuktu's image as a mythical place is ever present in the minds of Arabs and Europeans, and its intellectual prominence has been acknowledged as far back as the time when King Charlemagne of France. According to Ba, Timbuktu may never have existed if it wasn't for the Almoravides' incessant attempts to control the trans-Saharan trade. They succeeded in controlling the western side of the trading area, as a result of an alliance with the king of Tekrur in Senegal's valley region. To make their domination complete, the Almoravides conquered Kumbi Saleh, then the capital city of the Ghana Empire. Traders were then compelled to use the commercial routes towards the east in an attempt to circumvent the Almoravides' imposition. This is what led to the founding of Timbuktu which soon became a place of scientific and intellectual effervescence for arts and culture. The city was known well beyond its confines for its intellectuals who managed to stand their ground and preserve their influence in the face of conquerors such as Soni Ali Ber and the Askias.



According to one of the editors of the book, Shamil Jeppie, Timbuktu was known to the Arabs as the 'Northern Eldorado'. This image of the city as an immensely rich place in the heart of Africa was further propagated, not only in the Islamic world, but also among the Christians of the time, according to accounts of King Kanka Musa's epic trip to Mecca during which he was said to have lavished huge amounts of gold in the Near East, so much that the price of gold was depreciated for more than twelve years in the region. The mythical city of Timbuktu was also a point of reference in the 14th century European common parlance as, at the time, the expression 'going to Timbuktu' meant 'going to an almost imaginary or unreachable place'.

The collaboration between the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) to publish this book (in both English and French) can be described as an illustration of a revolutionary intellectual orientation which aims at discovering and re-enacting the true history of the continent and exploring the multiple reserves of traditional African knowledge hidden in ancient writings. Both research institutions are at the forefront in the cause for the promotion of intellectual production on Africa by getting intellectuals involved in knowledge generation, by making visible the product of their researches and by disseminating them around the continent and the world at large. They are both playing a critical role in the constant fight for the presence of Africa in the world intellectual order.

As a way of promoting original African intellectual knowledge further, Amadou Mactar Mbow and Thierno Ba called for similar collaboration among other research establishments located all over the continent as, despite the great number of important historical manuscripts that have been unearthed, many more intellectual vestiges of the past are still lying and rotting away in many places in Niger, Mauritania, Nigeria and Senegal have an equal importance in terms of intellectual history.

In the context of the unification of Africa as the only way out of the yoke of dependency and western hegemony, further translation and dissemination of the Timbuktu manuscript project in various parts of the continent is very important.