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Research Africa Reviews Vol. 2 No. 2, August 2018**RA Reviews Editorial Voice***Africa's Timbuktu's Manuscripts**– A Reminder about its Indispensable Depositories***A Scholars' Indispensable Tools: The Book****A Scholars' Indispensable Tools: The Book**

Having editorially exclaimed in the previous *RA Reviews* that, 'The Book: (is indeed) our intellectual companion,' this issue wishes to briefly continue with the conversation on the subject. It does so by first placing it in a broader context and then it zooms in on Africa's intellectual city of Timbuktu; a place where manuscripts were produced, circulated, and subsequently stashed away in depositories for a long while without many knowing about their contents and value. Even though each of us is aware that books are intellectual companions that serve as indispensable tools in changing our attitudes and lives we have, for some strange reason, neglected to look at our past social histories; the outcome of this neglect caused us to overlook cities such as Timbuktu that were at an earlier historical period a thriving intellectual city with rich depositories of library collections. So this editorial's comments act as an important reminder about that past history and about the city of Timbuktu. But before going to this city, the editorial takes a slight detour to other regions where the book was and remained central in their civilizational project.

During the early part of the 15th century South Asian Gesu Daraz (d.1422) described the manuscript that he had prepared in extremely endearing terms; he said "My book became my beloved – Thanks to it my pressed heart was opened." Then towards the end of the same century the Central Asian born Molla Jami (d.1492) observed in his poetic verse that, "There was no better friend in the world than the book". Both quotes were drawn from a chapter written by the doyen of South Asian studies, namely Annemarie Schimmel; the latter wrote 'The Book of Life-Metaphors' that formed part of Atiyeh's edited text that evaluated *The Book in the Islamic World*¹. Schimmel referred to these poets and others in order to partly show the extent to which the book imagery played and continues to play a pivotal role in Muslim poetry. She extracted various other examples to underline the strong association that the theologians, scholars, poets,

and others have had with the practice of bibliophilia. She also made mention of Frithjof Schuon, the perennial philosopher, who audaciously stated that, “God became Book for man [i.e. in the sacred text] and man must become book for God”². Schimmel’s numerous references and scholarly comments underscored the close connection that existed between us and the book.

In the same edited volume, Franz Rosenthal, a well-known orientalist, concluded his chapter by observing that, “of making many books there was no end in medieval Islam”³. He then finally ended off adding that “...and we have every reason to be glad that this was so”. The first part of Rosenthal’s quotation was, in fact, taken from the well-known but infrequently cited biblical verse of Ecclesiastes (12:12); the verse read: “Of making books there was no end, and much study is the weariness of the flesh”. Rosenthal acknowledged that considering this verse’s historical context there was no consensus during pre-modern times as to what it actually meant. He, however, prefaced his chapter by commenting on the linguistic aspects of the biblical verse, and he thereafter reflected on the Muslim scholars’ attitudes towards the writing of books and their proliferation; an issue that caused some concern because of both their quantity and quality.

Rosenthal’s informative chapter also dealt with, among others, the relationship between these books and knowledge production and the destruction of some on certain occasions; the latter happened because of the apparent ‘heretical’ knowledge that a few of these works contained. In other cases, according to Rosenthal, authors felt that they land up in hands that may misuse them or they might be improperly employed among subsequent generations. That aside, he assessed Khatib al-Baghadadi’s (d.1071) *Taqyid al-‘Ilm* (The Written Fixation of Knowledge) that discussed ‘the amassing of books’ in one chapter. Herein, Rosenthal stated, al-Baghadadi reflected on three inter-related issues; one of these was viewing books as the scholar’s indispensable tools⁴; an idea similar to what was reflected upon in *RA Reviews*’ previous editorial.

Since the production of knowledge was a key process that transformed communities as noted in the Muslim heartlands during the previous centuries, one poses a few questions: to what extent were books amassed in Africa to advance African civilization? When were they produced and which communities/individuals made invaluable contributions to its accumulation? While this editorial is not suggesting that it wishes to answer each of the questions and other related ones in this short editorial, it raises them since the book like elsewhere has also affected and occupied the lives of Africans; though being orally oriented, like the Arabs - as discussed by Rosenthal, were intimately involved in transmitting their social histories orally; an aspect that became one of their key and noteworthy characteristics.

Africans Reclaiming Their Heritage: Timbuktu’s ABIHISAR Project

When scanning/ surveying the continent, one can go back many centuries and generations to identify empires that contributed towards African scholarship in both oral and

written form. But since it is far beyond the scope of this editorial to venture in describing and discussing earlier developments, it will turn very briefly to Timbuktu's Ahmed Baba Institute for Higher Islamic Studies and Research (ABIHISAR) Project⁵. Timbuktu, as is known, is a city that is located in the heart of the Sahara and one that developed into one of the continent's foremost intellectual scholarly cities⁶ that consisted of many libraries⁷.

More than a decade ago, Thabo Mbeki, the former South African president, stressed that 'Timbuktu', which was described by some Europeans as 'a distant or an outlandish place,' was generally unknown to many of us who were distantly located from it. He used the opportunity to remind us – as this editorial also desires to do - that it was and still is a major depository of thousands of unedited book length manuscripts; all of which form part of the continent's rich cultural and literary heritage that deal with a variety of subjects – from astronomy to religious jurisprudence. After much effort from African lobby groups, UNESCO eventually recognized these manuscripts as an integral part of the 'Memory of the World Register'⁸.

Alongside this development, the African Union under the auspices of Mbeki's erstwhile political leadership took the initiative of bringing Timbuktu back from 'obscurity'; he did this by officially establishing 'The South Africa - Mali Timbuktu (Manuscripts) Project'. This was soon after Mbeki paid an official visit to Mali during November 2001. This project, which is still of global significance as pointed out by Shamil Jeppie, was seen as the first official cultural project of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD); it was a project that was officially declared on Africa Day during/in 2003 as a special South African Presidential Project (SAPP). At that time it was supervised by Essop Pahad who was the then Minister without port-folio in the President Mbeki's office⁹. It was set up with the objective of restoring and conserving some - if not all - of these precious and priceless Malian/ Timbuktu manuscripts.

And since South Africa under Mbeki's presidential leadership established SAPP, it, in turn, created the Timbuktu Manuscripts Trust (TMT); the latter was then managed by the Development Bank of South Africa and this was done with the idea of raising funds for the Ahmed Baba Resource and Research Centre that changed its name to the Ahmed Baba Institute for Higher Islamic Studies and Research. From that period onwards, SAPP - in association with the TMT - took charge of training via capacitating and skilling ABIHISAR staff; the main idea was to enable them "to improve the conservation environment and develop and implement strategies for long-term conservation and active preservation."

SAPP has brought many players on board to contribute to this project; it has devised a training programme that was conducted in three phases with three participating institutions, namely, the South African Department of Arts and Culture's National Archives, the National Library of South Africa, and Library of Parliament's Documentation and Restoration Section. Between 2003 and 2005 the three phases concentrated on different aspects; the first on

'preventive conservation' (i.e. the cleaning of the manuscripts and making protective enclosures/rare book boxes), the second focused on 'basic conservation repairs on damaged manuscripts,' and the third gave attention to 'paper conservation, rare book designs, leather repair and exhibition mounting' The three phase training programme thus exposed the trainees to subjects such as conservation management, conservation awareness, conservation ethics and team building¹⁰.

To date, the members of the SAPP and TMT have ploughed much of their energies to educate the South Africans about these manuscripts' cultural, literary, scientific and historical significance through fund-raising drives (in 2005) and the exhibition of a selection of manuscripts (during 2005 and 2008 respectively). All of these efforts were in line with what Mbeki referred to as a process of reclaiming our African past. At one of Mbeki's inspirational speeches he remarked that "we need to undertake, with a degree of urgency, a process of reclamation and assertion. We must contest the colonial denial of our history and we must initiate our own conversations and dialogues about our past. We need our own historians and our own scholars to interpret the history of our continent".

Mbeki's passion for the project was aroused for it came - to use Jeppie's words - as "a revelation to the South Africa president". The then president was indeed astounded and amazed when he realized the enormous amount of textured material that had been written centuries ago. He acknowledged that these manuscripts were concrete evidence of the rich African legacy that could not be ignored and must be recognized that they were of importance and immeasurable value to the African Renaissance project. In fact, if many social scientists come along to assist in this special intellectual project then one is confident that many positive results would emerge and this would demonstrate that Africa made an input in all forms of human knowledge; a point that Gutto¹¹ highlighted.

Towards a Round-Up

On this note, let us wind up and emphasize that Africa's intellectual heritage that consist of manuscripts, books and other material culture cannot be disregarded. Timbuktu's plethora of manuscripts and those elsewhere on the continent were and will remain indispensable tools; these should time and again be retrieved, be read, and be reflected upon. Thereafter, our current generation of scholars – emerging and established – should consume, consult and create fresh knowledge in order to bring about the necessary transformation at various levels; this, it is hoped, would then assist in seeing positive changes occur among the current and future generations towards the continent and its diverse socio-cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic communities.

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Endnotes:

¹ Schimmel, Annemarie. 1995 'The Book of Life-Metaphors'. In George Atiyeh (Ed.): *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East* New York: SUNY, Ch. 5 pp.71-92.

² Schimmel *ibid* p.71.

³ Rosenthal, Franz. 1995 "'Of making many books there was no end: The Classical Muslim View'. In George Atiyeh (Ed.): *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East* New York: SUNY, Ch. 3 pp.33-56.

⁴ Rosenthal *ibid* p.38.

⁵ Youbba, Sidi Mohammed Ould. 2008. 'The Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Islamic Studies and Research'. In ed. Shamil Jeppie & Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Eds.): *The Meanings of Timbuktu*. Pretoria: HSRC. Ch.3 pp. 287-301.

⁶ Also consult Ousmane Oumar Kane: *Beyond Timbuktu. An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; a review of this work appears in an earlier issue of *RA Reviews*. And one also read Caroline Davis & David Johnson's 2015 edited text: *The Book in Africa: Critical Debates*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

⁷ Jeppie, Shamil & Aslam Farouk-Alli. 2005. 'Timbuktu's Manuscript Libraries – Repositories of African History'. In Cora Ovens (Ed.): *Biblio Africana 8: From Papyrus to Print*. Cape Town: South African Library. May Digital Format. Ch. 2 pp. 7-17.

⁸ Jeppie, Shamil. 2008. 'Re/discovering Timbuktu'. In Shamil Jeppie & Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Eds.): *The Meanings of Timbuktu*. Pretoria: HSRC. Ch.1 pp. 1-17.

⁹ Jeppie *ibid* p.9

¹⁰ Minicka, Mary. 2008. 'Conservation in the Extreme: Preserving the manuscripts of Timbuktu' In *Timbuktu: Script and Scholarship*. Cape Town: Iziko Museums of Cape Town for the Ministry of Arts & Culture. Ch. 3 pp. 33-44.

¹¹ Gutto, Shadrack B.O. 'Towards a New Paradigm for Renaissance.' In *International Journal of Renaissance Studies*. 1(2): 306-323, 2006.

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