

Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the South African-Mali
Project Fundraising Dinner
Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town
8 April 2005

Premier of the Western Cape, Ebrahim Rasool,

Honourable Minister and Chairperson of the Timbuktu Manuscripts Trust, Essop
Pahad,

Honourable Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan,

Your Worship, Mayor of Cape Town, Nomaindia Mfeketo,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen:

I am very pleased to be afforded this opportunity to address this distinguished gathering of our social partners, who are here tonight to lend support to an important project that brings together the governments and peoples of Mali and South Africa.

This dinner is one of many efforts to raise funds for the preservation and promotion of a rich ancient legacy of African literary and scholarly heritage. I trust that by the end of this dinner we would have given generously so that we can preserve the important gift, the Timbuktu manuscripts, a gift which, in reality, belongs to all of humanity.

An ancient Tamacheq saying from Mali still echoes amidst the sun-scorched mud houses and desert sands of Timbuktu:

“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 Timbuktu.”

The ancient city of Timbuktu, with its impressive architectural heritage such as the Jingere-Ber and Sankore mosques, which date from around 1325 to the late 15th century, was home to mosques that became the epicentre of scholarly and religious instruction for which manuscripts were needed.

At the south-end of the vast shimmering sands of the Sahara Desert, Timbuktu emerged near the banks of the Niger River, whose waters ensured that this great centre of learning also became a great terminus of the trans-Saharan trade coming from all destinations in Africa, Asia and Europe.

Camel caravans, with their cargo of salt and gold, gave rise to a flourishing and profitable intellectual exchange, best expressed in the words of the great medieval author Leo Africanus who wrote in the 16th Century that:

“In Timbuktu there are numerous judges, scholars and priests, all well paid by the king. Many manuscript books coming from Barbary are sold. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods”

Those magnificent, illuminated manuscripts were paid for in real gold nuggets, the cash of the day for the prosperous and wealthy of Timbuktu. In August 2002, the Ink Road Symposium in Mali drew international attention to the rich centuries-old legacy.

Indeed, it was the ink, precious imported paper and the creative expression of African thinkers and scholars who produced and preserved for posterity manuscripts that they had written themselves, in their mother tongues such as Tamacheq and Songhay as well as others in Arabic, together with other writings that were collected from other places.

These manuscripts reveal the rhythm of daily life, from sophisticated jurisprudence, trade transactions, philosophical and humanitarian thought, to the mundane life of ordinary citizens as well. The marginal notes are rare descriptions of astronomy, weather and other invaluable information. In one 16th century text, Professor Hunwick came across a report of a meteor shower, which reads:

“In the year 991 [1583 A.D.] in God’s month of Ragab the Goodly [August] after half the night 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 by that. It continued until after dawn.”

Such is the richness of the texts that they would revolutionise African Studies and our understanding and interpretation of African history. Yet, the elements, the fine abrasive desert sand and termites are a serious threat to the very survival of these manuscripts.

For many decades, academic scholars, including the pioneers such as Professor John Hunwick and Professor Sean O’Fahey, have valiantly sought to preserve and promote the literary legacy of African and Islamic manuscripts from Nigeria, Zanzibar, Mauritania and, most significantly, Mali.

UNESCO, the Ford Foundation and government agencies too have generously supported these sterling efforts. Indeed, I am very pleased to welcome tonight, Professor John Butler-Adam of the Ford Foundation.

Our own humble initiative, the SA-Mali Project, complements the on-going preservation and scholarly work around the world to carry out a mammoth task involving several hundred thousand manuscripts.

Our immediate priority is preservation or conservation. Another is the academic research being conducted by Dr. Shamil Jeppie, which, hopefully, will be supported by other academic institutions and scholars.

These manuscripts must surely be regarded as the supreme depository of written African indigenous knowledge. In the words of Professors Hunwick and Henry Louis

Gates, these manuscripts will help erase the denial of the fundamental equality of intellect to Africans.

One of Africa's pioneering archaeologists, the late Professor Bassey Andah, gave an important inaugural lecture in 1985 at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, in which he championed the cause of our cultural history and African self-reliance and proclaimed:

“I suggest here (that) for the African man to fully understand his present situation, he must trace his roots and course of his journey to the present; and to make meaningful progress in the future he must not only appreciate but also appropriate his cultural history.”

It is in this same spirit that Mali and South Africa have undertaken this immense challenge so that those manuscripts may be optimally housed and preserved in perpetuity to enable scholars to unlock the mystery and knowledge of our collective past.

As Africans we are engaged in the historic struggle to achieve Africa's renaissance. Among other things this requires that we draw inspiration from such treasures as the Timbuktu Manuscripts, which tell the story that we have the native capacity, wisdom and intellect truly to determine our future.

This is part of what inspired the inter-governmental agreement between South Africa and Mali signed in 2002, which has led to three major thrusts to the Timbuktu Manuscripts project.

First, we have implemented a conservation programme to protect and improve the environmental storage conditions for the manuscripts. The first phase of the project we undertook in this regard was the development of a training programme for Malian conservators working at the Ahmed Baba Centre in Timbuktu.

In 2003 and 2004 the South African National Archives hosted a group of Malian trainees who spent time working in the conservation studios in Tshwane and at the National Library here in Cape Town.

This is clearly a mammoth work-in-progress. But already, we have succeeded in storing the manuscripts individually in specially designed boxes, which will, hopefully, extend the lifespan of these exquisite and unique manuscripts.

Secondly, the project intends to rebuild the Ahmed Baba Centre to one of international stature while at the same time being mindful of the need to ensure its architectural harmony with ancient Timbuktu. In short, within our limited resources and with your support, we aim to provide world-class facilities so that physical conservation, access and scholarship can all flourish once more in Timbuktu.

Recently, a team of engineers, architects and builders from the Western Cape visited Timbuktu to assess the needs for the construction of the new library. This is an excellent example of a public-private partnership co-operating within the context of

NEPAD. Hopefully, we will see other social partners from across Africa and the rest of the world coming forward to join hands in this very worthwhile cause.

Thirdly, we hope to promote academic study and public awareness of the magnificent and ancient African and Islamic heritage at Timbuktu. The manuscripts vary in content from religious treatises and poems, to documentary letters dealing with legal and commercial matters, and others that relate to slavery, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, history - all of them subjects of immense interest to scholars and the African population at large.

Commenting on these manuscripts, National Geographic News said: "These sacred manuscripts covered an array of subjects: astronomy, medicine, mathematics, chemistry, judicial law, government, and Islamic conflict resolution. Islamic study during this period of human history, when the intellectual evolution had stalled in the rest of Europe was growing, evolving, and breaking new ground in the fields of science, mathematics, astronomy, law, and philosophy within the Muslim world."

The SA-Mali Project has much to offer all of us. Anyone who has visited Timbuktu will tell you what an honour it is to be associated with such a treasure trove of ancient manuscripts.

As we know, the President of Mali, President AT Toure, and I formally launched the project in Johannesburg, on Africa Day, in 2003.

A Trust Fund to raise funds from businesses and individuals for the conservation of the manuscripts and the building of a new library has been established. The Development Bank of Southern Africa is responsible for managing the funds. As I said earlier, and I repeat our plea, that as many of us as possible, all of us, should make our humble contributions to this important project.

Clearly, the success of this project will inspire the conservation of other cultural treasures in Africa. We hope that this will also assist with the development of mechanisms within the African Union to protect Africa's intellectual property and indigenous knowledge from exploitation for wrong purposes.

I must express my appreciation to the Premier and his technical team, to Minister Pahad and the inter-ministerial committee, to the members of the Trust Fund and to the Ministry and Department of Arts and Culture, especially to the National Archives and the National Library, for all the sterling work they have done on the project so far.

I re-affirm our support for this important project and commend the Timbuktu Manuscripts Trust Fund to you and all fellow South Africans for your financial and material support.

Thank you.

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Quotes:

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