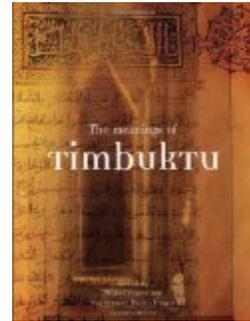


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Shamil Jeppie, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, eds. *The Meanings of Timbuktu*. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa Press, 2008. xiii + 375 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7969-2204-5.

Reviewed by David Robinson
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Timbuktu and Beyond

Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne have coordinated a magnificent contribution to African intellectual history in this book.[1] Jeppie is the director of the Tombouctou Manuscript Project in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town; and Diagne, until recently professor of philosophy at Northwestern, is professor of French and philosophy at Columbia University. The Tombouctou Manuscript Project began following a 2001 trip to Mali of Thabo Mbeki, then president of South Africa. Thanks to the encouragement of Malian President Alpha Oumar Konare, himself a historian and archeologist, and his historian wife, Adam Konare Ba, President Mbeki and the South African delegation were able to travel to Timbuktu and visit the libraries of this fabled town. They were so impressed by the manuscript collections of Timbuktu, and what this implied about an old and widespread scholarly tradition in Africa, that they committed considerable resources to developing the Tombouctou Manuscript Project at the University of Cape Town, holding a conference in 2005 and publishing this book in 2008.

The contributors are well-established scholars in Western, African, and Islamic traditions. Some are well known to Africanists; some have expertise in such subjects as paper and Arabic calligraphy; and others are known mainly in such places as Timbuktu, Niamey, and Zaria through their work with manuscripts and conservation. The collection includes essays by John Hunwick and Sean O’Fahey, perhaps the premier scholars who

combine Africanist and Arabist credentials; Hunwick’s work on Timbuktu, Songhay, al-Maghili, and Arabic bibliography frames much of this publication. The title is well chosen: “meanings” of Timbuktu suggests the many forms of significance, and many directions of work, of the fabled town and the larger region of the Niger River surrounding it.

After contextual pieces by Jeppie and Diagne, the first section provides an “Introduction to the Timbuktu Region.” Roderick McIntosh summarizes some of his work on the “Elder World,” the early urbanization of the Middle Niger Delta, going back at least two thousand years, and extending to and beyond the Timbuktu region on the basis of survey archeology; this provides a much longer and larger context for Timbuktu than the usual commentary about its *floraison* (“flourishing”) in the Songhay of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Jonathon Bloom begins the examination of the scholarly production of Timbuktu by looking at the unusual but crucial subject of paper. Never produced in sub-Saharan Africa, it was imported from North Africa at great cost and rather late to permit scholars to copy important works and write their own. Sheila Blair then examines the Arabic calligraphy of Timbuktu and the Western Sudan, placing it in the context of Maghribi forms and examining particular styles in Qurans copied in recent centuries. Timothy Cleaveland pairs Timbuktu and Walata, and the close relationship of several scholarly lineages who moved between the two towns over the last millennium.

Part 2, "African Arabic Literature as a Source of History," looks at manuscripts and writing. Paulo de Moraes Farias shows that the famous Timbuktu chronicles, the *Tarikh al-Sudan* and the *Tarikh al-Fettash*, are part of a genre that emerged in the seventeenth century to celebrate the Songhay Empire of the Askiyas and to suggest a convergence of three groups—the Arma rulers, the Askiyas who had been displaced, and the scholarly lineages themselves. Drawing on his magnum opus, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuareg History* (2003), he shows that the traditions of writing and Islamic identity go back several centuries before the *floraison* of Timbuktu. Moulaye Hassane and Hamid Bobboyi take on the tradition of 'ajami, writing non-Arabic languages in Arabic script. This practice, for Hausa, Fulfulde, and other West African languages, goes back several centuries. It has considerable Islamic pedagogical uses, especially for the less literate Muslim population, as Beverly Mack has shown in her many publications and here in an essay about women scholars, which revolves around Nana Asmau, the daughter of Uthman dan Fodio. Bobboyi shows the widespread use of 'ajami by Uthman and other members of his family to write history and justify the movement that led to the Sokoto Caliphate and the enormous literary output in nineteenth-century Hausaland.

Murray Last uses his considerable knowledge of this literature and regime to write a stimulating piece, "The Book in the Sokoto Caliphate." He explores the cost of paper; the copying of manuscripts; the various skills and professions involved; and the concerted effort to spread Islam, Islamic learning, and the justification of the Uthmanian movement. He gives a sense of the lives of the intellectual communities in the larger region in one of the many gems of this volume. Aslah Farouk-Ali and Mohamed Shaid Mathee, associated with the project at the University of Cape Town, examine some of the Timbuktu collections and particularly some *fatwa* produced by scholars and judges.

Part 3, "Scholars of Timbuktu," features the Kunta family and their contributions as teachers, scholars, counselors, historians, and jurisconsults. Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti, the intellectual founder of the lineage, is featured in contributions by Yahya Ould al-Bara and Mahamane Mahamoudou. Mahamoudou gives a useful list of al-Mukhtar's writings and their content. Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh focuses on al-Mukhtar's son, Sidi Muhammad, and his correspondence, especially with the leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate. He pays particular attention to a letter to Uthman dan Fodio, and its encour-

agement to rule with justice, moderation, and balance. Muhammad Diagayete concentrates on Al-Shaykh Abu al-Khayr, a teacher and pious example to Muslims of Timbuktu in the twentieth century.

Part 4, "The Timbuktu Libraries," describes the collections of manuscripts in the town and the pioneer role played by the Ahmed Baba Center, founded in 1973 with strong UNESCO support and now renamed the Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Islamic Studies and Research. Thanks to South African support, the institute will soon move into a new building. This section gives opportunity to Abdel Kader Haidara to speak of the vast collection over which he presides and that has so much promise for the illumination of the history of the Niger Buckle region. He offers interesting observations on the long concealment of the Timbuktu intellectual riches, during the colonial period and in response to the negative French stereotypes of Islam, and the reappearance and accessibility of the collections in the last three to four decades. Ismael Diadie Haidara and Haoua Toure of the Fondo Ka'ti library contribute a very useful essay on the huge manuscript resources of the town and the twenty-one private libraries that have been opened to scholars and visitors since 1996.

Hunwick then sets out the "Arabic Literature of Africa" project on which he and others have been working for decades and which has yielded four invaluable volumes of Arabic bibliography. He understands this as a "Brockelmann" of sub-Saharan Africa, whose contributions to intellectual history have been neglected for so long in contrast to the "Islamic heartlands." Charles Stewart then introduces the database, the Arabic Manuscript Management System, which he has designed over the last twenty years, beginning with the Butilimit (Mauritania) materials with which he was most familiar, but extending now to Nouakchott manuscript descriptions, Segou (from al-hajj Umar and his son Ahmad), and Timbuktu.

Part 5, "Beyond Timbuktu," concludes the volume with an essay by Sean O'Fahey, Hunwick's longtime collaborator, describing the Arabic literature of Northeast and East Africa, much of which is contained in the first volume of *The Arabic Literature of Africa* (1994). He goes on to describe the Swahili 'ajami literature of the coastal region, which is featured in volume 3B of that work. Anne Bang focuses her discussion on the Zanzibar National Archives, originating in the materials kept by the sultans of Omani origin in the nineteenth century.

Jeppie, Diagne, their fellow contributors, and the

many others supporting this project have rendered enormous service to the understanding of the intellectual history of African Islam, centered on, but not limited to, Timbuktu; to continuing research into that history; and to the preservation and dissemination of that heritage and the manuscripts on which it is based. Arabists, specialists in *'ajami*, archeologists, literary scholars, and others are now much more likely to exploit the riches of Tim-

buktu and to transform the understanding of the Western Sudan and indeed sub-Saharan Africa in the coming decades.

Note

[1]. This book is also available as a free download in PDF form at <http://www.hspress.ac.za/product.php?~productid=2216>.

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