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Libraries in the Sand Reveal Africa's Academic Past

By Nick Tattersall

November 10, 2006

**Article posted online by the Reuters at: <http://www.reuters.com>
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Timbuktu, Mali (Reuters) -- Researchers in Timbuktu are fighting to preserve tens of thousands of ancient texts which they say prove Africa had a written history at least as old as the European Renaissance.

Private and public libraries in the fabled Saharan town in Mali have already collected 150,000 brittle manuscripts, some of them from the 13th century, and local historians believe many more lie buried under the sand.

The texts were stashed under mud homes and in desert caves by proud Malian families whose successive generations feared they would be stolen by Moroccan invaders, European explorers and then French colonialists.

Written in ornate calligraphy, some were used to teach astrology or mathematics, while others tell tales of social and business life in Timbuktu during its "Golden Age," when it was a seat of learning in the 16th century.

"These manuscripts are about all the fields of human knowledge: law, the sciences, medicine," said Galla Dicko, director of the Ahmed Baba Institute, a library housing 25,000 of the texts.

"Here is a political tract," he said, pointing to a script in a glass cabinet, somewhat dog-eared and chewed by termites. "A letter on good governance, a warning to intellectuals not to be corrupted by the power of politicians."

Bookshelves on the wall behind him contain a volume on maths and a guide to Andalusian music as well as love stories and correspondence between traders plying the trans-Saharan caravan routes.

Timbuktu's leading families have only recently started to give up what they see as ancestral heirlooms. They are being persuaded by local officials that the manuscripts should be part of the community's shared culture.

"It is through these writings that we can really know our place in history," said Abdramane Ben Essayouti, Imam of Timbuktu's oldest mosque, Djingareï-ber, built from mud bricks and wood in 1325.

Heat, Dust and Termites

Experts believe the 150,000 texts collected so far are just a fraction of what lies hidden under centuries of dust behind the ornate wooden doors of Timbuktu's mud-brick homes.

"This is just 10 percent of what we have. We think we have more than a million buried here," said Ali Ould Sidi, a government official responsible for managing the town's World Heritage Sites.

Some academics say the texts will force the West to accept Africa has an intellectual history as old as its own. Others draw comparisons with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

But as the fame of the manuscripts spreads, conservationists fear those that have survived centuries of termites and extreme heat will be sold to tourists at extortionate prices or illegally trafficked out of the country.

South Africa is spearheading "Operation Timbuktu" to protect the texts, funding a new library for the Ahmed Baba Institute, named after a Timbuktu-born contemporary of William Shakespeare.

The United States and Norway are helping with the preservation of the manuscripts, which South African President Thabo Mbeki has said will "restore the self respect, the pride, honor and dignity of the people of Africa."

The people of Timbuktu, whose universities were attended by 25,000 scholars in the 16th century but whose languid pace of life has been left behind by modernity, have similar hopes.

"The nations formed a single line and Timbuktu was at the head. But one day, God did an about-turn and Timbuktu found itself at the back," a local proverb goes.

"Perhaps one day God will do another about-turn so that Timbuktu can retake its rightful place," it adds.

Related Article and Exhibit

The December 2006 issue of the *Smithsonian Magazine* includes an article entitled The Treasures of Timbuktu, written by Joshua Hammer, with photographs by Alyssa Banta. The article is available online at <http://www.smithsonianmagazine.org/issues/2006/december/timbuktu.php>.

In addition, the Library of Congress presents an online exhibit entitled *Ancient Manuscripts from the Desert Libraries of Timbuktu*. The introduction states: "Dating from the 16th to the 18th centuries, the ancient manuscripts presented in this exhibition cover every aspect of human endeavor and are indicative of the high level of civilization attained by West Africans during the Middle Ages." The exhibit is available at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mali/>.