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How Deep the Well: History and the Journey from Selma to Timbuktu

by Amilcar Shabazz*

The Inter-Diaspora Conference on Education of the African Child for the New Millennium, held in Mali, West Africa, involved a most significant sharing of strategies, insights, and inspiration. With a broad recognition that our hopes of a bright future is based upon how well we cultivate the minds and hearts of our young people today, the Coalition of Alabamians Rebuilding Education (CARE) looked at how best to reclaim excellence through the rebuilding of education in concert with our people throughout the African World Community. In going to Africa we committed ourselves to improving our work to rebuild education and to see that work as integral to the international struggle for human rights. Our right to vote is meaningless if we are not exercising our human right to self-development and self-determination as a people. Each day in Mali brought new ideas and information. The trip was truly an amazing and unforgettable location for a conference with so ambitious an agenda.

The greatness of Mali has not been lost on U.S.-born African scholars. Monroe N. Work, in his “The Passing Tradition and the African Civilization,” [*Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 1, No. 1. (Jan., 1916), pp. 34-41] wrote about the “high state of civilization” that our ancestors had achieved in the Mali empire in the Western Sudan. Popular education and advanced study in this region had reached a pinnacle unsurpassed anywhere else on the planet. The most “active

center of learning” in Mali was located in Timbuktu at the University of Sankore. The rise and “passing” of the greatest of the Sudanese kingdoms, that of the Songhay, extends over a millennium, but Work dates its “golden age” from 750 to 1591. The closing of this age is marked by the Moroccan pasha Mahmud Zarqun’s exiling of “the celebrated scholar” Ahmed Baba (see John Hunwick’s essay in *History of West Africa* by Ajayi and Crowder). While the 1600s brought a decline in the economic fortunes of Timbuktu in particular and sub-Saharan Africa in general (from the escalation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the Boer invasion at the continent’s southernmost point), the legacy of educational excellence remains ours to claim.

Timbuktu, a name given the place by the Tuareg people that literally means Buktu’s well, has a deep, spiritual meaning for African people. There and in other great Malian cities such as Segou and Djenne our people amazed the world with the power of African genius. What our people did a millennium ago we can and will do again in this new millennium. We touched one of thousands of ancient manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Center that was written by African scholars centuries ago. One of these was entitled “An Essay on Power” and it was a refutation of the ideas that Niccolo Machiavelli had written in *The Prince* around 1515. This critical essay was written within two years of the publication of *The Prince*. In our internet age e-mail, cell phones, jet planes, and faxes, it’s still a tall order to find scholarly discourse so quickly let alone five centuries ago when camel-based caravans across the Sahara desert was the only way a

political tract from Italy could have gotten to Timbuktu. The well of African intellect, talent, creativity, and discipline is very deep indeed.

We gained “up close” knowledge about the process of rebuilding education in Mali from visiting classrooms and speaking with the chief and elders in a small village such as Ngaran; talking to children and teachers at the Institute for Popular Education in Kati, a city of 46,000; and discussing the rebuilding process with national leaders such as the Mme. Adame Ba Konare, the First Lady of Mali, Malian Education Minister, Moustapha Dicko, Bishop Mori Julien-Marie Sidibe of Segou, and the Hon. Adama Samassekou, President of the People’s Decade for Human Rights Education (PDHRE). It has been my pleasure to speak to students here in Tuscaloosa at the University of Alabama, Stillman College, and public schools such as Matthews Elementary about the struggle to rebuild and reclaim educational excellence under way in Mali and Alabama. The African American Studies at the University of Alabama has been fortunate to host a reception during Black History Month, this past February 2001, for the Malian delegation to the U.S. led by PDHRE President Samassekou. The reception was attended by students, faculty, the Provost of the University, and UA System Board of Trustees member Judge John England. The Mayor of Tuscaloosa extended the keys to the city to delegation members.

From the Alabama delegation’s journey to Timbuktu at the beginning of the new millennium many great things have begun to develop in our state and in

Mali. We look forward to convening again in November in another historic educational summit.

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