

## AFRICA'S ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION: AND ITS CONTINENTAL CHALLENGES

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### ABSTRACT

*Anyone acquainted with Africa's rich social history cannot deny the fact that Islam – as a dynamic religious tradition - has indeed been an integral part of its identity. In fact, it was Ali Mazrui, the Africanist, who powerfully described this dimension when he highlighted the continent's triple heritage (of which Christianity and African Religious Tradition also form a part). Though Khalid Diab, the Egyptian-Belgian journalist, significantly remarked that, "Islamic Civilization is so hard-wired into Europe's cultural, social and intellectual DNA that it would be impossible to expunge its influence" (Al-Jazeera 8 Jan 2015), one is of the view that Africa neatly fitted that profile since it – more than any other continent - tangibly reflect that. Indeed when one scans the length and breath of the continent, one comes across various types of evidence that points to the fact that Muslims left behind their footprints in almost every sector of the continent. These have since become part of Africa's continental heritage and most of them have fortunately been preserved by its numerous nation-states. For example, when traveling through central Africa one finds many scholarly manuscripts that have yet to be edited and that cover different themes. And when moving to East Africa's coastal regions one comes across numerous historical sites/towns such as Kilwa that are clearly reminiscent of Muslim influence. And as one travels further south of the continent, one finds ample proof that point to the Muslims' presence. All of these perceptibly demonstrate that one cannot sidestep the Muslim contribution to this continent's identity. So the purpose of this presentation is fivefold: the first is to conceptualize the term 'Islamic Civilization' that intends to act the essay's theoretical frame; the second is to briefly reflect upon the continent's social history south of the Sahara; the third is to comment on the rich Islamic manuscript collections and other heritage items that contributed towards the making of this civilization continentally; the fourth is to narrate in summarized form the status of Timbuktu as an educational centre; and the fifth is to tabulate the challenges that the continent currently faces in its attempt to preserve and protect its heritage items such as manuscripts from those who wish to destroy them.*

Key Words: Africa, Muslim Civilization, heritage artefacts, ajami manuscripts, historical sites

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### Introduction

Africa is a vast continent that has at times, sardonically and sarcastically, been described at international intellectual forums as a 'country' by a few non-African nation-states; though this is indeed far from the truth and a sad indictment on those that did so, it provides one a glimpse of how Africa and its diverse communities are stereotypically viewed in regions such as Europe and Asia. Dowden's (2014) informative text on Africa underscored this when he assessed the continent and shared with the readers Africa's positive characteristics; a continent where one comes across communities that are poor but friendly and that are materially underdeveloped but hospitable. He underlined that it is a continent like any other that consists of people that reflected a variety of cultures, that speak many dialects, and that possess positive endearing qualities.

Even though some of Africa's nation-states currently reflect an array of socio-cultural, economic and political problems, their distant past reveal that their structures belong to larger narrative; one that that are connected to varied social structures that have had a long social history and that formed part of earlier established empires and civilizations. These have, it may be argued, been deliberately airbrushed out of the prescribed texts and publications with the hope that Africa's students do not learn about the rich legacy that their forebears left behind. Since this has been the case, scholars such as Ali Mazrui (d.2014) and others have made renewed efforts to set aright the incorrect perceptions perpetuated by, among others, the media; they have done this through the production of research outputs in academic journals, feature articles in magazines, research reports in monographs, and informative documentaries that highlight Africa's religio-cultural and ethnic communities. For them all of these academic labours should be regarded as significant steps to correct the wrongs and re-write the actual narratives that capture the continent's past so that current generations and those to come may appreciate and understand its rich social history. Africa's societies and others across the globe should indeed be made aware of Africa's past; a period that witnessed the formation of a string of empires and civilizations.

It is therefore this essay's purpose to turn its attention to some of these aspects. The basic reason for this is to offer a fair insight into and some understanding of Africa's splendid and fascinating past; one that brings to the fore, among others, the miscellaneous tribal groupings, the assorted linguistic communities, and the various religious traditions that provided it with a unique identity. The essay narrates to what extent one of its religious traditions, i.e. Islam, made an indelible impact upon its identity and its outlook. Islam, as a dynamic religious tradition, helped to shape its people's philosophical perspectives and their religious thinking, and it assisted in carving out a communal character that morphed the African communities into a heterogeneous African society; some of whom were called 'African Muslims.' As a collective these African Muslims, in turn,

contributed to what may be described as an 'African Islam' that - despite their shared commonality (i.e. religion), differs markedly from those who unveil a European Islam or from those who disclose an Asian Islam.

That aside, the essay has a few objectives in mind: it first conceptualizes the term 'Islamic Civilization'. Thereafter it illustrates in brief the continent's social history south of the Sahara. With this as a backdrop, it then surveys and tabulates two important aspects that highlight the outcomes of an Islamic civilization on the continent; the one is to comment on the Islamic manuscript collections that laid the foundations for African Muslim intellectual history, and the second is to make reference to Timbuktu as a significant trade and educational centre that was used by the different Muslim empires between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. And at the end it wishes to record some of the continental challenges (such as the rise of extremist theological positions) that the continent currently faces in (a) preserving the Timbuktu manuscript collections and (b) protecting the different heritage sites in and beyond Timbuktu. As mentioned earlier, the essay opens with a concise discussion regarding the phrase 'Islamic Civilization.'

### **Islamic Civilization: And Its *Tawhidi* Principle**

#### **Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' Thesis**

Although the concept civilization has been in use for decades, it was given prominence when Samuel Huntington proposed his 'Clash of Civilization' thesis in a seminal post-Cold war 1993 article. Herein Huntington outlined and explained the fault lines that divided societies into several civilizational blocks. Huntington conveniently conflated the concept of 'culture' with that of 'civilization' since he opined that, "civilization and culture both refer to the overall way of life of a people, and a civilization is a culture writ large. They both involve the 'values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance'" (Huntington 1998). From among the different civilizational blocks that he identified in his controversial and debatable thesis, he somewhat deliberately did not really consider African civilization as a key civilizational block in his grand taxonomy. For him - like other European/American scholars who hold similar views of the continent - Africa did not really possess its own identity despite the fact that it was far larger than the USA and China put together! Huntington's theory seemed to have conjured up a stereotypical image of Africa as if it was literally and figuratively a backward and a 'dark continent' that does not possess characteristics that will propel it into a viable political player in the years ahead. When one reads Huntington it is as if Africa has had no rich cultures, no prominent empires, no major dynasties, and no noteworthy civilizations.

Leaving that aside and even though Huntington did not offer any satisfactory definition of the concept 'civilization,' he (1998) made a telling remark when he stated that, "religion is a central defining characteristic of civilizations." Indeed this is a significant observation from a political science perspective because 'religion' was not a pivotal player during the twentieth century since secularism was the significant variable that was punted and pursued in all spheres of human life. Nonetheless, religion that was catapulted into prominence after the late 1970s events in Nicaragua and Iran into the public arena, it not became a critical identity marker but a key variable in the civilizational systems that Huntington recognized. Having categorized seven civilizational systems of which Western Civilization was the most dominant in his view, Huntington considered potential threats coming from two other major civilizational blocks; the one was the Sinic/Confucian Civilization and the other was the Islamic Civilization.

According to Huntington's informed opinion, these two would be the ones that would rival the West in all sectors in the new millennium. Despite counter arguments against Huntington's thesis, he - rightly or wrongly - correctly predicted that the Sinic Civilization was going to challenge the West's hegemonic position politically and economically; and he sensed that the emerging Islamic Civilizational block, which is represented by most if not all the Muslim nation-states and that has had a rich socio-religious and cultural history, was going to continue to be a key religio-political player in international affairs that the West will have to keep at bay using all means necessary. Leaving aside conspiratorial theories, one may wish to tentatively concur that Huntington was not far off in his predictions regarding the conflict; it is a conflict that is still unfolding and that takes various forms, and it is one that also affects the African continent in a very specific manner.

#### **Bakar's Definition and Description of an 'Islamic Civilization'**

Be that as it may, Huntington's problematic definition of the concept caused scholars such as Esmer (2012) to rightly ask: 'Is there an Islamic Civilization?' Since this essay is not concerned about Huntington's thesis as such but more interested in the definition of the term 'Islamic Civilization' that was listed in his taxonomy and that is indeed a contested term, it makes an attempt to unpack the understanding of this term based upon scholarly endeavours by respected Muslim scholars such as Osman Bakar; the latter produced an insightful publication titled *Islamic Civilization and the Modern World: Thematic Essays* in which he perceptively defined, grappled, explored and explained this term. Whilst one is reluctant to employ the term 'Islamic Civilization' and prefer 'Muslim Civilization' - a term also used by Fathi Osman (2006) when he addressed 'What is a Muslim Civilization?' - because of the descriptive word's linguistic connotations, the term 'Islamic Civilization' will be used throughout - despite its contested nature as articulated by Bakar - with the note that the insertion of 'Muslim' instead of 'Islamic' essentially means that the civilization that exist came about because Muslims established it for Muslims (and non-Muslims); whereas the word 'Islamic' implies that the Muslims are practicing a civilization that in accordance with the main precepts as contained in the *Shari'a* system; in other words, the Muslim society live their lives in complete conformity with the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah without at any point compromising with these primary sources.

That aside, here the focus turns to Bakar whose definition and understanding applies to the way this essay describes Africa's 'Islamic Civilization.' After having presented reasons why scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein (b.1930) preferred 'world-system' theory instead of 'civilization,' Bakar countered these by listing his reasons for using this contested concept qualified by the word 'Islamic.' Bakar opined that though 'Islamic Civilization', which has 'a simple, coherent, and crystal clear worldview', was 'a world-system according to the criteria set forth by its theorists,' it was much more than that; according to Bakar, it was 'both a world-empire and a world-economy' that essentially differed from others because of its core content that was and is embedded in the *tawhidi* principle; in other words, it is a principle that permeates all levels of human and cosmic existence and that, according to Osman, consistently promotes a set of universal moral values.

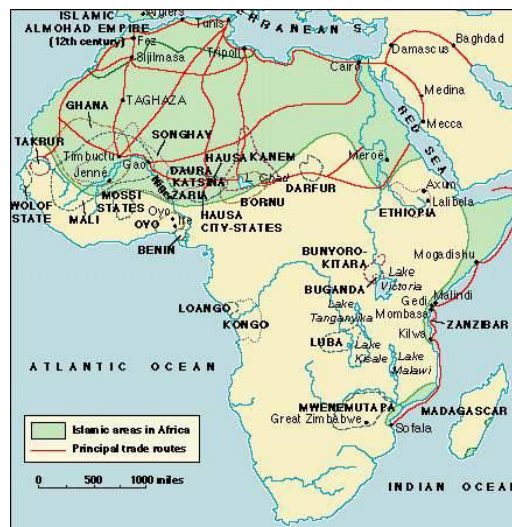
In Bakar's view it was this particular 'principle of unity' that gave and continues to give Islamic Civilization its distinctive characteristics and identity. Whilst Bakar stated that Islamic Civilization's foundational principle and its earthly goal are one and the same, he stressed that when an individual - from the point of departure to the destination - embarked upon a spiritual cum intellectual journey then the mentioned principle became internalized; and this internalization process thus automatically brought about a qualitative change in the individual's understanding, insights and attitude towards life and it thereafter took him/her on an enriching and progressive civilizational path. Bakar interestingly made reference to the Malay-Islamic world that pursued this course through its embracing of a particular philosophical outlook that was, of course, rooted in the *tawhidi* principle and that was unmistakably explicated by the Asha'ari theological school for Southeast Asia's Melayu communities that exhibited two essential characteristics, namely rich diversity and cultural brilliance.

Now when one ponders over Bakar's explanation of what Islamic Civilization actually means and his characterization of the Melayu speaking communities in that region, one cannot but draw parallels between them and those diverse Muslim communities that resided and inhabited the African continent. Africa's Muslims like their co-religionists in Southeast also upheld the very same foundational *tawhidi* principle that affected each and every aspect of their lives; and it was as a result of having absorbed this principle into their African environment that they eventually set up empires and established sultanates that contributed towards Africa's Islamic Civilization. But before one describes and discusses this phenomenon, one has to place this in a socio-historical context to demonstrate how the connections between Africa and Islam were forged and developed.

#### Africa And Muslims: A Symbiotic Relationship

It is indeed beyond the scope of this relatively short essay to offer a comprehensive social history of Africa and since this is the case it only intends to give an overview that depicts its overall social history. This description should hopefully assist in giving some insight into and an understanding of how Muslim civilization was formed continentally. However Muslim civilization was not created as a result of one incident; it was constructed as a consequence of a variety of forces and factors over a long period of time. All historical sources as noted by Clarke (1982) and Hiskett (1984) seem to concur that Africa's connection with Islam and Muslims goes back to the prophetic period (i.e the seventh century); and from that moment onwards the connection gradually grew and gained grounds as Muslim armies entered the continent via Egypt; this was as a result of a series of defensive wars against anti-Muslim forces of which the Byzantine Empire was the front-runner. From that historical juncture onwards the northern part of the continent - also referred to by Leo Africanus (d.1554) as the 'Mediterranean Africa' - remained a part of the expanding house of Islam.

Africa's Muslims:  
From Empires to Nation-States' Communities



### **Africa's Muslim Connections**

The entrance of Islam on African soil slowly changed Africa's religious identity; so instead of it being the home of African Religious Tradition (ATR) and Christianity only it also became the locale within which Islam became absorbed and a pivotal political power. Islam's - or rather the Muslims - presence radically transformed Africa's collective character as it when= it acclimatized and adapted to the new environments. This has been cogently illustrated when Muslim empires such as the Umayyads (circa 661-750) and the 'Abbasids (circa 750-1250), ruled from their respective capitals, namely Damascus and Baghdad. This was particularly the case when both empires' rulers extended their socio-political and economic influence across the North African region (aka Mediterranean Africa). During the Abbasid era as well as under the Ottoman Turk (circa 1258-1924) hegemon North Africa remained firmly in Muslim hands and throughout this lengthy period Muslim identity became entrenched. At various historical moments structures such as mosques (Al-Qayrawan) and educational institutions (Al-Azhar University) were erected; and as a consequence, many of these became significant historical heritage sites and from then onwards acted as evidence that Islamic Civilization was in the making and subsequently flourished.

Be that as it may, the mentioned empires' representatives continued to extend their tentacles not only across Africa's northern part but they turned their attention to the Sahel (i.e. the desert region). Having been represented by strong nomadic tribes and influential (noble) figures, these empires' flags were carried across the inhospitable Saharan desert terrain to create space for themselves and their religious tradition (namely Islam) in the western buldge of the African continent. These valient efforts thus caused Islam and its followers to intermingle and socialize with predominantly ATR communities who were by and large traditional in their make up. Though in some areas Muslims encountered hostile challenges as expected, they in the end managed to spread and settle without having had to deal with any fierce opposition from among the tribal groups that were dominant in that region. Since these social interactions were met with tolerant attitudes and responses towards the Muslims, Islam was accommodated in some instances through a syncretic process that mixed with ATR thought and practices; this thus intially gave rise to a hybrid form of religion. Later this was, however, gradually replaced through religious reforms with a purer form of Islam; a form that was recognized as distinctly different in thought and practices from ATR despite some of their commonalities.

Over time the reforms alongside other socio-historical developments transformed the thoughts and practices of Africa's ethno-linguistic clans and religio-cultural communities; these changes contributed towards a process that ultimately laid the foundations for the formation of an 'Islamic Civilization' in parts of the continent. This was an outcome that may not have been envisaged as the Muslims made their way into Africa during the earlier years but it was, however, realized as the centuries unfolded. Numerous factors gave rise to the increase in the Muslims' presence in both the continent's western and eastern parts where the groundwork for the mentioned civilization was eventually set. Apart from the defensive conflicts the early Muslims had to deal with, subsequent generations moved across Africa's desert terrain to explore economic opportunities and create commercial networks. As these traders improved and augmented their trade ties with tribes and communities, they took along with them Sufi shaykhs who not only acted as itinerant teachers but who too participated in the commercial ventures.

Being trained in the jurisprudential, theological and mystical sciences of Islam, these shaykhs, according to Viktor (2000), used their skills to impart the basic teachings that were based on the ideas of earlier Sufi masters such as Abdul Qadr Jilani (d.1166) who fathered the well-known Qadriyya order. Many of these Muslim teachers cum traders innovatively blended their comprehensive insights of Islam with the some of ATR's ideas without vehemently imposing their practices on Africa's indigenous host communities (Levtzion & Pouwels 2000). As a consequence of these Shaykhs' teaching techniques and the traders commercial connections with the indigenous tribes they resourcefully unlocked pathways into Africa's hinterlands moving from Mediterranean Africa across the Sahara to reach the Senegambia coastal areas of west Africa and from its lengthy east coast (i.e. the land of the Zanj that forms the coastal areas of Kenya and Tanzania respectively) into the heart of the Congo region (Sperling 2000; Wilkinson 2015); they succeeded to do so in spite of the challenges such as the harsh dry desert conditions and thick rain forests that they had to pass through in order to create stable settled structures that were used to reinforce their identities.



TRADERS



West African gold merchants using weights and measures

### Africa's Muslim Empires

All of these Muslim incursions across the Sahara towards Africa's coastal areas and landlocked territories of Sudanic Africa (west and east) resulted - during the twelfth century - in the gradual formation of the respective Mogadishu (900-1700), Kilwa (1200-1505) and Zanzibari (1856-1964) Sultanates along Africa's east coast and as early as the eleventh century the West African communities witnessed the creation of the Kanem (700-1376), Mali (1230-1600), Songhai (1340-1591), and Bornu (1369-1893) empires. These, in turn, paved the way for the construction of the famous late eighteenth century Sokoto Caliphate (1804-1903) that was under the able leadership of Usman dan Fodio (d.1817). During the time these majestic empires, sultanates and caliphates flourished Timbuktu's Sankore mosque/madrasa along with the Djinguereber mosque and the Sidi Yayha mosque laid the foundations for the 'University of Timbuktu'; this city in which these institutions were set up contributed in a substantial way to the production of Islamic knowledge and the building of historical libraries that housed thousands of manuscripts that were written by the regions' knowledgeable scholars and learned shaykhs.

It may be argued that at various historical time periods empires and sultanates emerged, flourished; and as they declined they were replaced by others that were powerful politically and that influenced the developments economically, culturally, educationally, jurisprudentially, and theologically. One sultanate that survived into the late twentieth century and that made their mark in the mentioned areas was the Umanis; they became a powerful force that countered the Portugese since the seventeenth century (circa 1660-1698) in order to take charge of Zanzibar; it was, however, only by 1840 that this island came into Umani hands. Nevertheless, whilst one can talk about a prosperous Islamic Civilization represented by empires and sultanates in the mentioned regions one cannot really speak of such a civilization in the southernmost part of Africa because Muslims were numerically insignificant; the only exception is the northern portion of Mozambique, which included Cape Delgado, and that was previously an integral part of 'the land of Sofala' (Lapidus 2002). As a matter of fact, Mozambique's Sofala and other city-states such as Pemba and Kilwa that were geographically located along Africa's coast remained important ports and centres not only for commerce and trade but they became important centres of learning. As a result of the growing number of educational institutions that promoted a learning culture in these city centres, many manuscripts were written in Ki-swahili as well as some of the local languages all of which employed the Arabic script (Hunwick 2001; Bonate 2008) and a similar story unfolded at the Cape of Good Hope where theological texts were written in the Afrikaans language that used the same script unbeknown to Cape Dutch/British governors (Davids 2011).

Along the African east coast these traders and teachers, being agents of socialization, spread Swahili culture and in the process Islam became an integral part of the region's identity. The Swahili speaking East African Muslims - unlike their co-religionists in West Africa who were Malikis - were predominantly Shafis and Ibadis; these two important jurisprudential schools along with the Hanafis formed key jurisprudential cum theological groups in that region. In addition, to these legal schools many of the East African and Southern African Muslims also identified with various Sufi masters and their *tariqah* (i.e. order/path); one order that played a prominent role in West, East and Southern Africa affairs was the Qadriyyah (Vikor 2000). Interestingly along the African east and southern coast these orders acted as important unifying strands to counter the Portuguese that landed there during the sixteenth century to colonize the region.

In fact these took place during the 'scramble for Africa' period (Pakenham 1990); one during which the powerful Portuguese were challenged by other emerging colonial powers such as the Dutch, Belgians, British, French, and Germans. During this time the Muslim empires weakened and these colonial powers found it opportune to invade and take over through the use of arms and

other methods. They thus took complete control of the African and the Southwest Asian regions and being strong and powerful meant that these colonialists easily conquered and won over territories; by doing that they naturally took charge of the trade from the fragile Muslim empires and the demoralized indigenous ATR communities. In the process of doing so, these colonial powers vied with each other for Africa's vast tracks of land that had a wide mixture of rich resources such as gold, ivory and salt. These developments had a devastating effect on Africa's resources and these, in turn, also negatively affected other remnants of Africa's Islamic Civilization; they affected the long established Muslim heritage sites and the unprotected manuscripts that were produced in cities such as Timbuktu that were prominent places of life-long learning where Islamic knowledge was produced.

### **Muslim Heritage: Its Islamic Manuscripts**

Despite Timbuktu having made an impression on the minds of travellers, geographers, historians and others, scholarship seem to have done this city and others a disservice in not having provided the necessary information about the rich heritage (such as its Islamic manuscript collections) that it possessed. Scholarly attempts in Europe and elsewhere appear to have airbrushed this unique collection of literatures out of their records. One may argue that little or nothing noteworthy was carried in the media or reported by academics about this Timbuktu's major depository that literally contained thousands of unedited manuscripts; a collection that form part of the continent's rich cultural and literary heritage that deal with a variety of subjects: from astronomy to Islamic jurisprudence. Curious travellers such as Ibn Battuta (d.1369) and resident chroniclers such as Abdur-Rahman As-Sa'idi (d.1655), however, recorded some of the cultural activities in this and other cities.

As-Sa'idi, in particular, catalogued these literary developments and outputs among the elites in his famous *Ta'rikh as-Sudan*. Herein he illustrated how scholars criss-crossed the Saharan desert to study, record and disseminate Islamic sciences knowledge. Harrow (2000), in fact, underlined that the educational escapades and cultural connections between North Africa and those communities residing beyond the Sudanic belt (i.e. sub-Saharan Africa) were firmly established and that the scholarly outputs continued unabatedly for long periods; in this culturally enriched and transformed environment scholars competed with one another many of whom (like As-Sa'idi) were stimulated by Ibn Khaldun's (d.1406) *Kitab ul-'Ibar* and other works that were intellectually invigorating.

### **West African Muslim Scholarship**

Although Arabic was the region's *lingua franca*, scholars beyond the Sudanic belt chose to write in their mother tongues and they did so by creatively using the Arabic script; a script that was not only linguistically supple but one that was innovatively accommodating. Scholars employed this script to produce Songhai and Hausa literature in West Africa (Hunwick 2001; Richard 2004), to write Swahili literature in East Africa (Richard 2004; Sharawy 2005; Bonate 2007) and to pen Afrikaans literature at the tip of Southern Africa (Davids 2011; Haron 2003). Whilst those that appeared in Afrikaans were mainly jurisprudential and theological texts, those that were produced in Hausa and Swahili went beyond jurisprudence and theology; they went on to produce scientific literature such as Mathematics and Physics. From among the scholars in the Bilad-as-Sudan and West of Sahara Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti was a prominent figure; he wrote many works such as *Kashf al-Gumma* (The Uncovering Doubt) and *Al-Kawkab al-Waqqad* (The Shining Star).

When West Africa was Arabicized and Islamized, it became the hub of socio-economic activities and these resulted in the emergence of cities such as Timbuktu and Djenne; these became important nodal points that not only joined numerous trade routes but also gave life to a hive of African intellectual scholarship which came into close contact with the Arabic literary movement that swept across the Sudanic belt. This consequently led to the surfacing of a vast body of literature that ignited intellectual activities in the region. The rich bibliographical compilations by scholars such as John Hunwick (1996; 2005) bear testimony to the splendid literary heritage that the earlier African (Muslim) scholars left behind. Among the languages that benefitted from the intellectual interaction were Hausa and Fulani respectively; some of the leading linguists realized the adaptability of the Arabic script and they naturally adopted it to enhance and enrich their (local) languages.

## Muslim Creative Works



Timbuktu Manuscripts

### East African Muslim Scholarship

Similar developments took place along the East Coast of Africa, where Arab Muslim traders conducted commercial activities with the peoples along the coast and shared their language and culture with the coastal communities; these interactions gave birth to Ki-swahili, which eventually became the *lingua franca* of the region. Some scholars argued that the contact between Arabs and East Africans was much earlier than the contacts that were made between West Africa and the Arab world. Leaving aside this historical debate, the Swahili language gave rise to a rich tradition of literature (O'Fahey 1994; 2005a). An array of scholars made their inputs to beautify and embellish the language through the production of poetry and prose works; these literary developments resulted in their works being duly acknowledged by scholars of world literature.

Harrow (2000), for example, referred to the *Qasidat ul-Burda* (Poem of the Mantle) that is an oft-recited religious poem that was composed by Shaykh al-Busiri (d.1294). The poem that was essentially a set of melodious praises for Prophet Muhammad (d.732) was written in Arabic and later translated into Swahili. Since then it was and is still regularly recited along the East African coast from Kenya and Mozambique to the Cape at the tip of Southern Africa where a sizeable number of Muslims reside. The latter community's religious leaders, as a matter of fact, through their socio-linguistic engineering skills used the same script to produce their series of theological texts in Arabic-Afrikaans; and it was the Turkish theologian, namely Abu Bakr Effendi (d.1880) whose *Bayan ud-Din* (The elucidation of the religion) gave the Afrikaans language its enduring identity. Achmat Davids (1991) argued that it was a linguistic feat that was never surpassed even though related Arabic-Afrikaans texts appeared between 1880 and 1960.

From what has been narrated in this section, it is difficult for anyone to deny the substantial contribution that African Muslim scholars have made to the various genres of literatures on the continent; inputs have been made from Cape to Cairo and from Kilwa to Dakar over the past few centuries. And since UNESCO has proactively alerted the world in general and the academic societies in particular during 1988 about the Timbuktu libraries and the rich collection of unedited manuscripts that are still tucked away in familial trunks and communal compounds efforts had been made to secure and protect these manuscripts. So at this point the essay moves on to narrate a short story of Timbuktu; a city that had been described by some as mysterious and outlandish because not much was known about it. On this note, it may be stated that it was deliberately ignored by the scholarly world in the West in spite of the wealth of knowledge that had been produced and exported over the centuries.

### Educational Centres: The Case Of Timbuktu

#### An Outlandish Commercial Centre

It was in fact Edward Said's *Orientalism* that rudely awakened everyone as to the manner the 'orient' was portrayed by scholarly texts produced in the West. Said vividly illustrated the extent to which Arabs and Islamic Civilization were described and misrepresented. Said, who operated from within the western scholarly arena, forced scholars from the Middle East and Africa to take serious note of the irreparable damage that the publications from the West had caused; their stereotypical portrayals conjured up images as if Arabs and Muslims were sex-maniac communities with the large harems. The Middle East and African scholars thus felt morally obligated to respond by telling their own stories. They thus took up the challenge and pushed their energies into writing about their communities and commenting on the extant manuscripts; all these renewed academic activities helped to slowly set the stories straight and assisted to put them on the literary map; one that was dominated by western

scholarship. What this all proved was they are able to represent themselves and were/are in a position to tell their own unique informative stories through lengthy feature articles and qualitative research projects.

As these articles and projects were publicized, some African scholars gave all their attention to the display of manuscripts (such as the Al-Kunti collection and the Boularaf collection) that were housed in Timbuktu and other cities. They along with partners at other educational institutions studied selections of manuscripts from the Timbuktu collections; an assortment of manuscripts that has been stashed away in large steel trunks and that have been stored in dilapidated libraries. Their close study of some of the manuscripts gradually yielded positive results and their cumulative studies illustrated the invaluable contents of each of the manuscripts and these therefore added value to the existing body of knowledge in and beyond Timbuktu. Since Timbuktu remained the main city where these collections have been housed, it is perhaps opportune to briefly reflect upon this city that had been mentioned in the works of Ibn Battuta and Leo Africanus who visited it in 1353 and 1510 respectively.

For many on the African continent and elsewhere 'Timbuktu' remained an unreachable, mysterious city of which tit-bits of information occasionally filtered down to share short descriptive pieces about the rich treasures that are found in private and public institutions. In fact, South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki (2006) made reference in his official speech to the *Collins Concise English Dictionary* that referred to the word 'Timbuktu' as "any distant or outlandish place"! Nonetheless, according to informed visitors such as Ibn Battuta and historians such as Al-Saidi Timbuktu, which is located along the Niger River and the southern edge of the Sahara, started out as a small Kel Tamasheq nomadic tribe settlement in the eleventh/twelfth century; but with the passage of time it was opportunely included along a trade route that conveniently changed course. As the trade in salt and gold expanded so did the town; according to Felix and Pascal Fletcher's 2012 Reuters' report a fifteenth century Malian proverb proclaimed that, "Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuctoo." In any case, Timbuktu grew from being a small place to a thriving town that became a meeting point for various ethnic groups such as the Wangara and Tuareg tribes. In addition to the town functioning as a socio-cultural centre, the town's elite inhabitants also gained commercially from the burgeoning slave industry. In any case, by the fourteenth century it was absorbed into the Mali Empire that succeeded the Ghana Empire and by the late fifteenth century it was one of the main cities of the Songhai Empire.

#### **A City Transformed: An Intellectual Store-House**

During these periods Timbuktu transformed itself from an important trade locale into a centre of education and culture; as an educational cum cultural centre it naturally attracted hordes of scholars from across the Saharan region. These scholars set up knowledge networks that witnessed book trade rapidly increase and this cause their production to escalate; it did so to such an extent that book trade was considered more valuable than trading in gold! As an educational centre Timbuktu's knowledge production industry from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries flourished; it blossomed to such a degree that it witnessed, on the one hand, the writing and copying of books, and, on the other, the importation of books. In fact, the city specialized in the copying of books, which were in demand, for export.

Timbuktu Trunks of Manuscripts



This special industry naturally contributed to the formation of libraries and educational institutions. Though many libraries have disappeared and gone into disuse, others have been revived and given a face-lift. Among the present library outlets there is the Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library, Mohamed Tahar Library, Al-Wangari Library and the Library of Sheikh Zayni Baye of Boujbeha (see Farouk-Alli 2005; Haidara & Taore 2008); however, one of the most important institutions that were given a



fresh lease of life was the private library of Shaykh Ahmad Baba to whom the essay shall return later. These libraries moreover complemented, the educational institutions that were established and one of the most famous among these were the Sankore madrasa; an institution that is similar to a modern-day university that contemporary society is familiar with. The Sankore madrasa acted as the main campus with two branches located at the respective mosques of Sidi Yahya and Djinguereber. These three mosques/madrasas essentially formed – a point mentioned earlier - what may be called the ‘University of Timbuktu.’

The madrasa like all other similar institutions had its own library and its holdings were reasonably shelved with more than thousands of books. For the record, the renowned scholar, Ahmed Baba al-Massufi (d.1627) who was taught by his learned father as well as Shaykh Muhammad Baghayogho al-Wangari and Qadi Al-Aqib bin Muhammad, had a personal library of more than 1600 books; this collection included many of his own works such as *Mi'raj al-Su'ud* (Ascending the Stairway) and *Kifayat al-Muhtaj* (Sufficient for the one in need). Even though Baba's rich personal library was unhappily ransacked and plundered by the Moroccans whom he had opposed, the Timbuktu community was certainly fortunate to have inherited his extant works that were copied and circulated subsequent to his death (Zouber 2008). Since Ahmed Baba, who wrote 56 texts, was recognized as a very distinguished figure from that city, the Mali government officially opened the Ahmed Baba Resource and Research Centre (popularly referred to as Cedrab in French) during November 1973; this decision was an outcome of a Malian government decree that was issued during January 1970.

In sum Timbuktu was a wealthy and prosperous city that, on the one hand, was a significant trade centre located along an important commercial route and, on the other, it was a distinctively thriving educational centre. In both areas, Timbuktu demonstrated its ability to deliver and succeed; it delivered commercially whatever was traded in and beyond the city and it produced intellectually whatever was written and discussed among the scholars and in the scholarly circles. The questions that now arise are: what needs to be done to preserve these heritage commodities? Which organizations should take charge of this process? How should they try to keep extremists who wish to destroy these ancient relics and texts at bay? These questions thus raise challenges that the continent encounters and that needs to be addressed. For this section only two issues will be dealt with: the first is the issue of preservation and it will share the South African story and the second tackles the policies that should be put in place to stop extremist groups from being hell bent on destroying artefacts that are historically invaluable.

#### **Africa's Heritage: Continental Challenges**

##### **South Africa's Intervention: The Manuscripts' Conservation and Restoration Scheme**

As indicated earlier UNESCO inscribed these Timbuktu manuscripts as an integral part of the ‘Memory of the World Register’ and, as fate would have it, the African Union (AU) under the auspices of South Africa's political leadership took the initiative of bringing Timbuktu back from obscurity. Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's (former) head of state, paid an official visit to Mali during November 2001 and, according to Jeppie (2008), it was given scant attention by the media. During this important visit, Mbeki initiated ‘The South Africa - Mali Timbuktu (Manuscripts) Project’ that was of global significance (Naidoo 2006). It was, in fact, the first official cultural project of the AU's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and was launched on Africa Day during 2003; on that day the project was declared a special South African Presidential Project (SAPP) and it was then under the supervision of Essop Pahad who was the former Minister without port-folio in President Mbeki's office. Along with the UNESCO earlier enterprise Mbeki's visionary leadership and bold inventiveness assisted in publicizing internationally the status of the Timbuktu libraries and the various collections of manuscripts. For Mbeki and his team the main challenge and indeed the project's purpose was to, among others, restore and conserve some - if not all - of the precious and priceless Malian manuscripts.

And since South Africa established the South Africa–Mali project, the SAPP under (former) President Mbeki's guidance set up the Timbuktu Manuscripts Trust (TMT), which was and is still managed by the Development Bank of South Africa; the idea behind this scheme was to raise funds for the Ahmed Baba Resource and Research Centre. The monies that were collected were not only to upgrade the Centre but to also finance the building of a new library and archives. And when it was overhauled and revamped, the Centre was re-named the Ahmed Baba Institute for Higher Islamic Studies and Research (ABIHISAR) on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2000 (Youbba 2008). In addition, the SAPP in association with the TMT took charge of training the staff; this was done through capacitating and skilling the ABIHISAR staff so that they may be able “to improve the conservation environment and develop and implement strategies for long-term conservation and active preservation.” SAPP brought many stakeholders on board to contribute to this project; it 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 building (Minicka 2008).

To date, the members of the SAPP and TMT have spent much of their energies to educate the South Africans and others 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 the African past. At one of the fundraising drives that took during 2005 in Tswane, Mbeki (2006) 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 passionate plea for SAPP was aroused when Mbeki realized the enormous amount of textured material that had been written centuries ago and that had been stored in Mali's ruined and abandoned structures. Mbeki acknowledged that these manuscripts were concrete evidence of the rich African legacy that they should at all costs not be ignored. He recognized that they were of immeasurable importance to the African Renaissance project; a project that is rooted in an era in which Africa is being reshaped and refashioned into a continent of the future. Even though the South African government remains a strategic partner along with Iziko Social History Collections Department in SAPP, it was and is still driven by Shamil Jeppie's Tombouctou Manuscripts Project (TMP) at South Africa's University of Cape Town and the Gerda Henkel Foundation has a produced series of episodes regarding the TMP (Farouk-Alli & Mathee 2008).

### **The Heritage Sites: Their Insecurity and Future**

Being the driving force behind the TMP, Jeppie expressed his deep concern in a TMP newsletter circulate on 17 December 2015 about the thousands of manuscripts that were placed in metal crates and moved from Timbuktu to Bamako; Mali's capital city that was under seige during 2012-2013. The political developments in Mali and its neighbouring countries raise many insecurity concerns; these are not only about the thousands of manuscripts but also the numerous heritage sites that this essay could not really address because of constraints of space. Be that as it may, the various reports such as those by Bate Felix and Pascal Fletcher's 4 April 2012 Reuters newspaper report that illustrated how 'Timbuktu: (shifted) from (a) city of myth to rebel stronghold' and how the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) took control of this ancient city. By June 2012 it was reported that Ansar Dine (AD), which adopted an extremist religious position, destroyed some of the city's popular shrines including the mausoleums of Sidi Mahmoud ben Amar and Sidi al-Mukhtar. The uncompromising AD and similar groups made their positions quite clear regarding their attitude towards burial sites that were declared as part of the World Heritage Sites in Timbuktu.

Way back in December 1988 UNESCO's World Heritage Committee identified parts of the city as heritage sites and thus placed these on its long list: (a) Timbuktu is a sacred place that has been central in the spread of Islam in Africa, (b) Timbuktu's mosques represent the Golden Age of the Songhay Empire and (c) The mosques represent living traditions in terms of use of materials and construction (Sidi 2012). AD's destruction of the mentioned places and other related sites caused UNESCO to set up a special fund to safeguard these sites through reconstruction and rehabilitation processes; some of these took place as soon as AD and others were pushed out of the city and returned to government hands.

These developments are indeed unhealthy and they may give support to Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' thesis and go against the thesis put forward by Bakar that Islamic Civilization is indeed one that is embedded in and guided by the tawhidi principle. The question, however, remains: how do governments counter the extremists groups that are bent on wanting to destroy heritage sites because of their myopic interpretation of Islam's primary sources? One assumes that the government cannot do it alone and this means that partnerships should be forged between it and the society; in addition, the government with UNESCO's assistance should put in place educational programmes that should help educate the Malian society; it should shed light on what it really means to pursue conservationist policies and why heritage sites should be given the necessary protection by everyone. Apart from teaching these policies and their implications, it should also underscore that these are not only tourist destinations that add financial value to the tourist industry's coffers; it should highlight the importance of these sites and manuscripts; all of these are not only historically and religiously relevant in terms of Muslim identity in Africa, but they should continue to act as an inspiration to future generations who will draw lessons from these heritage sites.

### Timbuktu-”Heavenly Clay”



#### Conclusion

The essay conceptualized the term ‘Islamic Civilization’ since the primary focus was on this phenomenon in Africa. Since Huntington introduced the concept within a controversial setting and that had highly debatable outcome, Bakar returned to the concept pointing out the problems associated with this loaded western constructed concept and thus proposed an alternative definition and description. Bakar’s ‘Islamic Civilization’ model thus fitted in with the African story that was partially told in the second section of this essay. With this social history backdrop in place, the essay narrated the position of the collections of Islamic manuscripts that were located in West, East and Southern Africa; what this revealed was that an Islamic Civilization was reflected in different parts of the continent and this proved to what extent the contribution towards African Civilization should not be discounted but viewed as a critical factor in the formation of a unique African Muslim identity; an identity that Mazrui articulated and discussed in his acclaimed *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* text.

And the African Muslim contribution was further noted when Timbuktu was used as a case study in this essay; it demonstrated how Timbuktu as an educational and cultural centre tangibly contributed towards Africa’s intellectual history. In the final section of this essay reference was made to basically two challenges; the one was how to protect Africa’s heritage sites and commodities and how to stave off the onslaught of extremists who are destroying these sites and materials. In the first instance, the essay shared information about South Africa’s positive interventionist role when it came on board to provide Mali the necessary support via its special presidential project. And in the second, it was stressed that the government of Mali should partner with civil society to set up educational programmes that would inform the current generation as regards formulating good policies that would assist in the preservation process and to neutralize extremist modes of thinking within the Malian Muslim society. These educational efforts might be viewed as ways of contributing towards the re-emergence of Africa’s Islamic Civilization in particular and in general the renewal of an African Civilization with the support of the African Renaissance project.

Finally, even though the essay would like to have widened the discussion by looking at other heritage sites that are, for example, located in Kilwa and the Cape, it was beyond the scope of this essay to do so. Nonetheless, it is hoped that other researchers would be stimulated to explore those, fill the gaps and reach some important findings.

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