

Issue 1, Fall 2022

# BOUCTOU

AN AFRICANA MAGAZINE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Trade and Scholarship in Medieval West Africa



# Welcome Letter

by Krista Johnson



Welcome to the launch of *Bouctou*, an Africana Magazine for Teachers and Students! The origin of the name "Bouctou", according to legend, comes from a Tuareg woman named Bouctou who founded Timbuktu, a city in Mali that holds historical significance as a major trading post on the trans Saharan caravan route. The rest stop she created for camels on the Niger River in the 1100s became the site of the city of Timbuktu.

The vision behind *Bouctou* is to create an accessible and appealing online resource for the K-12 classroom by providing informative articles, scholarly research and engaging commentary, and to support the curriculum by contributing quality Africa-focused resources and material. *Bouctou* issues will also contain a student corner with activities and lesson ideas for students that are aimed to excite and inspire them to further explore the African world. The first Issue explores Trade and Scholarship in Medieval West Africa and is sure to educate and inspire young learners.

As *Bouctou* continues to grow and evolve to meet the needs of young learners and educators, we welcome your comments and feedback.

*Krista Johnson*

Krista Johnson, PhD  
Director  
Center for African Studies  
Howard University



**BOUCTOU**



# Content

- 1 *Welcome* - Krista Johnson
- 3 *Introduction* - Mbye Cham
- 5 *Trans Saharan and Inter-Regional West African Trade 800-1500 CE* - Sarah Guérin
- 11 *How Do You Learn? The Master-Disciple Instruction in Islamic West Africa* - Elisa Prosperetti
- 15 *Master-Disciple Instruction: The family of Ousmane Kane* - Ousmane Kane
- 21 *Student Corner: Timbuktu Muslim City of Scholars* - Susan Douglass
- 31 *Student Corner: Activity: The Horse in Medieval West Africa* - Brenda Randolph

## Team

Editors: Brenda Randolph and Vanessa Oyugi  
Illustrator: Mark Robinson  
Art Director: Ania Ueno

Copy Editors: Karen Leggett Abouraya, Nadia Abouraya and Khalea Robinson

Board of Advisors : Elsa Wiehe, David Conrad, Jeanne Tougara, Mbye Cham

## About the Cover:

Images from top left to bottom right:

Ijaza: Wikimedia Commons (Dr. Nassar Mansour's Ijaza)

Catalan Atlas Mansa Musa: Wikimedia Commons

Great Mosque Djenné: Wikimedia Commons

Sankore: Wikimedia Commons

Ahmad Baba Letter Facsimile: Courtesy of Brenda Randolph

Body Guard of the Sheikh of Bornou: Wikimedia Commons

# Introduction

by Mbye Cham

This inaugural issue of *Bouctou* brings together five articles that are sure to contribute significantly to enhance our knowledge of different aspects of historical experiences and achievements and contemporary practices of African societies, in general, and West Africa, in particular. This first issue highlights three articles based on cutting-edge research by African Studies scholars, and two articles written expressly for students.

In her article entitled *Trans Saharan and interregional Trade 800 - 1500 c.e.*,

art historian Sarah Guérin (University of Pennsylvania) debunks myths and false assumptions about medieval West Africa and describes the critical role West Africa played in global trade. She highlights recent archeological evidence that demonstrates that (1) Salt did not dominate trade across the Sahara over time. Perhaps as early as the first century BCE, gold from West Africa surpassed salt as the main driver of trade. (2) Gold coin molds unearthed in Tadmekka (present-day Essouk, Mali) disprove the assumption that West Africans did not



**B<sub>3</sub>UCTOU**



mint gold. (3) Glass beads unearthed from graves in Kissi, Burkina Faso demonstrate that early West African societies were linked to the Roman Empire's vast trade networks.

Two other articles by Elisa Prosperetti (National Institute of Education in Singapore) and Ousmane Kane (Harvard University) describe the Islamic 'Master Disciple' method of instruction which focuses on the teacher-student relationship and oral mastery of written texts. Drawing on his own biography and first-hand experience, Kane takes us through his Islamic education journey.

Susan Douglass (Georgetown University) and Brenda Randolph (Howard University) close out the issue with two articles targeted at students. Douglass provides students with an overview of medieval Timbuktu, focusing on, among other topics, geography, trade, architecture, Mansa Musa, and Islamic education. For her part, Brenda Randolph provides a brief history of the horse in West Africa and how-to instructions on creating a dressed horse.

*Bouctou* is a welcome addition to the resources available for teachers and students and we hope sincerely that it will be a go-to source for much needed enlightenment and different perspectives on the West African past and present.

### IMAGE CREDITS

Great Mosque Djenne: Wikimedia Commons



BOUCTOU



# *Trans Saharan and Inter-Regional West African Trade 800-1500 CE*

by Sarah Guérin

A camel caravan winding its way through the sand dunes of the Sahara, bearing goods of unspeakable price – gold, luxury animal skins, elephant ivory, semi-precious stones, and spices. It could be a scene from a blockbuster movie, but it is also a historical reality. Trade across the arid Saharan desert flourished over a thousand years ago, from around 800 to 1500 CE, that is the period contemporary with the European Middle Ages. Before Portuguese and Spanish ships established the sea route between West Africa and the Mediterranean in the fifteenth century, the well-travelled desert routes connected the vibrant centers of sub-Saharan Africa with North African cities. This trans-Saharan trade played a major role in the economy and politics of the pre-modern world. Although difficult to study for a whole variety of reasons – not the least of which is the hostile conditions of the desert – the history of trans-Saharan trade is being studied by historians, archaeologists, and art historians to understand the critical role West Africa played on the world stage... although there is still much work to be done.

Archaeologist Roderick McIntosh

recently noted that for each ounce of earth excavated along the Niger river, the major throughfare of West Africa, there has been a ton moved along the Nile. That is a ratio of about one to 30,000. While today students of Mediterranean archaeology can at best contribute small corrections to our knowledge of those civilizations, archaeologists working in Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Nigeria, etc., regularly make major discoveries that profoundly shift our understanding of the past. Arguably, the most promising area for moving the frontiers of historical knowledge forward is West Africa. Let us look at three recent discoveries by archaeologists that disrupt long held assumptions and reveal the real role Africa played in world history.

## *FROM SALT TO GOLD*

Mineral salt collected in the Sahara was likely the first good traded between the nomadic pastoralists of the Sahara, Imazighen (sing. Amazigh, formerly called Berbers), with diverse agricultural communities to the south, in the Sahel, the so-called “shores” of the southern Sahara. Salt was needed by the settled agricultural communities





to keep themselves and their flocks alive in the hot climate. Perhaps by the rise of the Roman Empire (first century BCE), West African gold eclipsed salt and other foodstuffs as the main driver of trade. While the early history of trans-Saharan trade is still debated among specialists, by the early Islamic period (around 700 CE) there is increasing evidence, in written texts as well as from archaeological finds, that describes networks connecting communities in the Sahel with towns on the northern edges of the Sahara. For example, the ancient city of Sijilmasa in the Tafilat oasis (Morocco) was settled by a dynasty of indigenous Imazighen, the Banu Midrar, in the eighth century, as was Ouargla (Algeria), by the Banu Wargla, in the same period. The caravan routes were established, maintained, and manned

by other Amazigh clans that dug wells, protected watering stops, and prized oases along the route. In addition to salt quarried in the Sahara, they carried copper, textiles, and imported glass for exotic pelts, leather, textiles, ivory and horns of all types (elephant, hippopotamus), and importantly gold.

In this early period, West African gold largely came from two alluvial gold deposits: the Bambuk gold fields along the Falamé River, a tributary of the Senegal; and the Burré gold fields, upstream from modern Bamako along the Niger river. Arabic sources tell us that in the first millennium of the common era, the Empire of Ghana, a Soninke state, controlled access to the gold fields and their onward trade. In his *Book of Routes and Realms*, the eleventh-century Andalusian



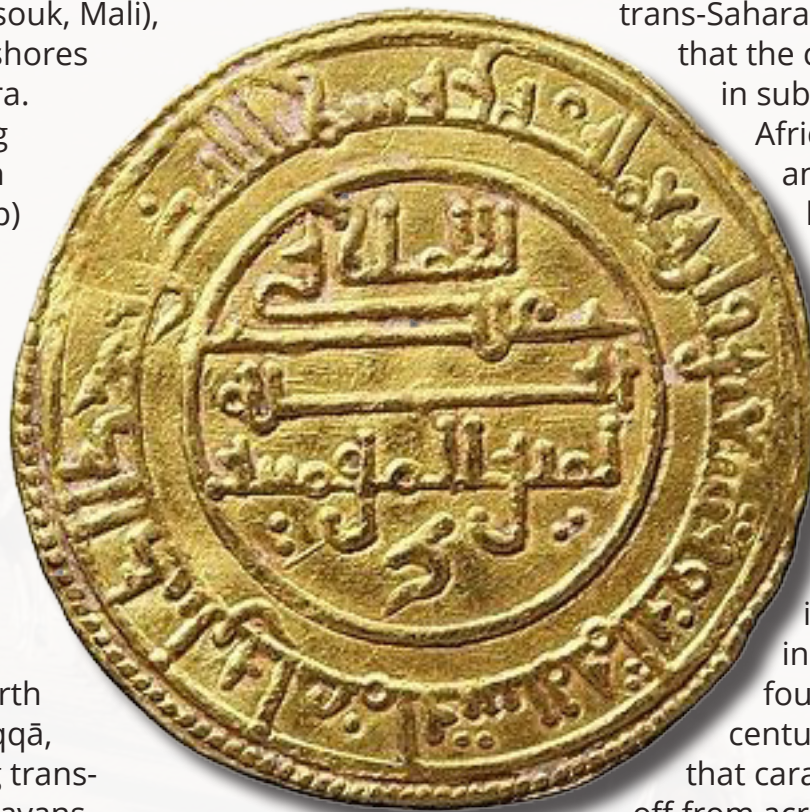
geographer and historian al-Bakrī provided one of the most detailed early accounts of the trans-Saharan gold routes (Levtzion and Hopkins, Corpus, 85). Soninke merchants from the Empire of Ghana brought gold to Tīraqqā, a city on the upper bend of the Niger River, which was an important throughfare across West Africa. In Tīraqqā, the merchants of Ghana met with counterparts from the Muslim Touareg city of Tādmakka (modern Essouk, Mali), at the very shores of the Sahara.

The Touareg (an Amazigh ethnic group) were true specialists in the trans-Saharan caravans. From Tādmakka, which is already 250 miles (400 km) north east of Tīraqqā, the Touareg trans-Saharan caravans departed for Ouargla, in what Al-Bakri describes as a gruelling fifty-day stretch. The caravans almost certainly did not take a straight route, as the imposing Hoggar mountains lie between the two entrepôts. Rather the route probably headed directly north to the string of Tuat oases, and followed their arc around the

Tademaït plateau to Ouargla. From Ouargla the caravans could bring their goods to cities like Qayrawān, or Mediterranean-oriented markets along the coast, like Sousse or Tunis. From here West African gold fuelled the kingdoms, dynasties, and Empires of the medieval Mediterranean.


## COINS

One of the recurring myths about trans-Saharan trade is that the communities in sub-Saharan Africa, merchants and political leaders alike, did not fully understand the value of gold. For example, the Mamluk historian Al-'Umari, writing in Cairo in the mid-fourteenth century, imputed that caravans set off from across the



Sahara with “valueless articles” like salt, copper, and cowries and “returned with bullion as their camels’ burden” (Levtzion and Hopkins, Corpus, 276). The implication is that Africans were ignorant of the real worth of their natural resources, a sinister myth perpetuated today. Recent archaeological digs at





Tādmakka conducted by Sam Nixon have, however, have helped unseat this falsehood.

Al-Bakrī too had suggested otherwise, when he noted that in the Touareg town of Tādmakka the gold obtained at Tīraqqa was purified and ‘minted’: “The inhabitants of Tādmakka are Muslim Berbers who veil themselves as the Berbers of the desert do... Their dinars are called ‘bald’ because they are of pure gold without any stamp” (Levtzion and Hopkins, Corpus, 85). This assertion was long contested by specialists who maintained that smelting and minting of gold was entirely unknown south of the Sahara. Sam Nixon’s recent archaeological digs at Tādmakka, however, uncovered gold coin moulds from a 950–1100 context, corroborating al-Bakrī’s report of the “bald” dinars and the gold trade along this trajectory. Moreover, he found a number of crucibles, including clay vessels for the melting and purification of metals, which still held microscopic traces of gold. Chemical analysis of the crucibles showed that at Tādmakka, gold was purified with a technology developed south of the Sahara using ground glass. Not only do these finds demonstrate that a form of gold currency was being produced at Tādmakka, but moreover that technical know-how was being used to add value to the raw material obtained from the merchants from Ghana before the bullion moved north across the Sahara. In Ouargla, these “bald” dinars were exchanged for a wide range of North African and

Mediterranean goods, such as copper, glass, foreign pottery (even porcelain), wheat, cotton, silk and semi-precious stones—all objects Sam Nixon found at Tādmakka that could only have come from trans-Saharan trade.

## GLASS

The invention of glass goes back to the third millennium BCE in Mesopotamia, and it was immediately a prized trade good moving through long-distance trade networks. By the first centuries of the first millennium CE, Mesopotamian and Mediterranean glass was a desired commodity in sub-Saharan Africa. Tombs from Kissi in modern Burkina Faso, about 125 miles (200 km) south from Gao, another of the important trade entrepôts on the Niger River Bend, date from the second to seventh centuries CE. The graves at Kissi have yielded a high number of glass beads that demonstrate involvement in inter-regional exchange in the period of the late Roman Empire. Sonja Magnavita conducted chemical analysis of the beads to determine and map out where they were produced. Surprisingly, the majority of the beads seem to come from east of Mesopotamia, that is into Persia and Western Asia. The vast networks of the Roman Empire facilitated trade between Mesopotamia, via the Mediterranean, towards North Africa, and from there they departed across the Sahara. The graves at Kissi therefore show that the Sahel region of West Africa was already a



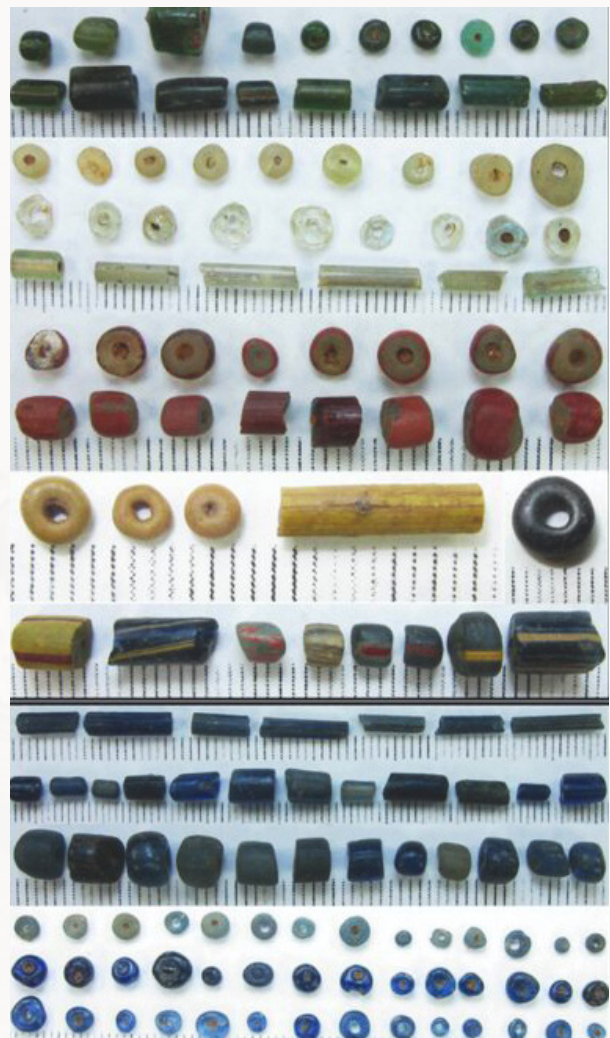
participant in the Roman economic sphere.

One small blue bead, however, did not show a chemical composition typical of Mesopotamian or Persian glass making – rather, it has a unique chemical signature, high-lime high-alumina (HLHA), that new research has identified as typical of the glass-making context in the ancient Yoruba city of Ile-Ife (modern Nigeria). There Abidemi Babatunde Babalola has uncovered an endogenous glass-making industry in Ile-Ife. Babalola's finds were shocking as it had always been assumed that primary glass production was an advanced technology unknown south of the Sahara. Once again, archaeology undermines biased assumptions.

Yet the identification of the bead at Kissi as being typical of Ile-Ife production pushes the envelope even further. Babalola's site at Ile-Ife dates from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, while the graves at Kissi date from the second to seventh centuries. The single blue bead found at Kissi therefore testifies to the primary glass production in sub-Saharan centuries earlier than even Babalola's finds. Indeed, HLHA beads have also been identified at the ninth- to twelfth-century site of Igbo Ukwu (Nigeria), as well as at the Niger River Bend city of Gao in the same time period. Clearly, early Yoruba kingdoms in modern Nigeria were capable of manufacturing a coveted commodity that positioned themselves favourably

in terms of long-distance, inter-regional exchange.

More excavations in West Africa will surely connect the dots on this smattering of exciting but minute finds. And more analysis of archaeological glass materials in North Africa and around the Mediterranean might also show the presence of the unique West Africa signature in objects well beyond the Sahara, witnessing African integration into economies and markets across the medieval world.





## SOURCES

Nixon, Sam. *Essouk-Tadmekka: An Early Islamic Trans-Saharan Market Town*. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

Brett, Michael. "Ifriqiya as a Market for Saharan Trade from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century A.D." *The Journal of African History* 10, no. 3 (1969): 347–64.

Hopkins, J.F.P., and N. Levtzion ed. and trans. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Berzock, Kathleen Bickford. *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Babalola, Adidemi Babatune, et al. "Ile-Ife and Igbo Olokun in the History of Glass in West Africa." *Antiquity* 91.357 (2017): 732–750.

Christie, Annalisa C., and Ann Haour. "The 'Lost Caravan' of Ma'den Ijafen Revisited: Re-appraising Its Cargo of Cowries, a Medieval Global Commodity." *Journal of African Archaeology* 16.2 (2018): 125–144.

LaGamma, Alissa, ed. *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art Publications, 2020.

Guérin, Sarah M. "Exchange of Sacrifices: West Africa in the Medieval World of Goods, c. 1300." *Medieval Globe* 3 (2017): 97–124.

Magnavita, Sonja. "Initial Encounters: Seeking traces of ancient trade connections between West Africa and the wider world." *Afriques* 4 (2013) URL : <http://afriques.revues.org/1145>

## IMAGE CREDITS

Timbuktu-Einzug: Wikimedia Commons

Yusuf ibn Tashfin Dinar: Wikimedia Commons

Glass beads excavated from Igbo Olokun, Ile Ife. Abidemi Babatunde Babalola



# *How Do You Learn?*

## *The Master-Disciple Instruction in Islamic West Africa* by Elisa Prosperetti

### ***How, and from whom, do you learn?***

We are taught to imagine that learning is something that you do alone, quietly, and usually from books. Our collective image of the scholar is of a person seated at a desk, surrounded by published volumes, and cut off from the world. But that is only one model of learning, and a partial one at that. Islamic pedagogy, instead, has long known, that “not all that people want to know lies within books...”<sup>1</sup> In fact, much of our authentic learning happens because we trust the teachings of someone more knowledgeable than us. In other words, Islamic pedagogy understands that human relationships are at the center of our learning. Knowledge is a social act, not a private one.

This article is about Islamic education in Africa. Many people don't know that about two-fifths of Africans are Muslim, and even fewer know that Africans have been practicing Islam for well over a thousand years. In fact, some of the most renowned centers of Islamic learning in the world are located on the African continent, such as the Al-Azhar mosque in Egypt and the Sankoré mosques of Timbuktu,

Mali. Sometimes people incorrectly assume that the Sahara blocked the southwards spread of Islam, but actually the opposite is true: the trade routes of the desert created networks that connected northern and sub-Saharan Africa, helping to spread the Islamic faith widely. Today, millions of Muslims live in sub-Saharan African countries like Senegal, Nigeria, Tanzania, Somalia and Sierra Leone.

So this article is about Islamic education in Africa, but it is also about why knowing about a different model of learning matters. Historically, Westerners have belittled African knowledge cultures because they did not understand them. Westerners' sense of superiority blinded them to the ways that Africans produced and shared knowledge, which was largely through the spoken, rather than the written, word. And unlike the lonely book, the spoken word relies on human connection: knowledge is a social act, not a private one.

Orality is, therefore, a central element of Islamic pedagogy, but orality is not independent of or unrelated to literacy. Indeed, Islamic education is about developing oral mastery of



written texts, a depth of understanding that eventually leads to the production of new knowledge in written form. The libraries of the Sankoré mosques of Timbuktu mentioned above, for example, held hundreds of thousands of manuscripts written by African intellectuals. When the African American scholar, Henry Louis Gates Jr., first saw those manuscripts, he said he “wanted to cry”:

“The first time I visited Timbuktu and saw those astonishing libraries with their wealth of scholarly texts, I wanted to cry. I grew up being told that Africans never wrote books, yet here was this astonishing treasure trove of extraordinary, hand-written manuscripts...I felt incredible pride and vindication.”<sup>2</sup>

Gates’ reaction to the libraries of Timbuktu shows how painful the belittling of African intellectual traditions has been for Africans and people of African descent. Yet Gates’ sense of vindication implies that he accepts the hierarchy of knowledge promoted by Westerners, in which the

text is considered superior to the oral. However, African Muslims understand that knowledge comprises both speech and writing. As the Senegalese scholar Ousmane Kane explains, “[t]extuality and orality have never been separated in this Islamic pedagogy. They are two faces of the same coin.”<sup>3</sup> Europeans shaped and promoted their own sense of superiority by elevating the written word over the spoken word, but in doing so they blinded themselves to the erudition of the African Islamic world.

Islamic education, then, is about the transmission of sacred knowledge from one generation to the next. The focus of the schooling experience is therefore the student’s relationship with one teacher, often referred to as the master-disciple method of instruction because learning happens through this one-to-one relationship. For learning to occur, the disciple must submit to the master’s authority. That authority, however, is not arbitrary. The master draws his authority both from his immediate knowledge of





religious texts like the Qur'an, but also from his status as a link in the long chain of knowledge transmission that connects the student to God. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the final prophet to whom God, through the Angel Gabriel, revealed the holy word. Muhammad recited and memorized the word of God, which was written down and collected in the form of the Qur'an. In the same way, students recite and memorize the words of holy texts as directed by their teachers. Students' submission to their teacher's authority echoes the Prophet's submission to God.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the meaning of the Arabic word "Islam" is submission, for that is the believer's relationship to the Almighty.

The Qur'an is the core text of Islamic schooling. Teachers instruct students in Qur'anic verses, and students practice reciting and memorizing them in front of the teacher. As the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, Muslim students memorize the verses in Arabic even if they do not speak or write Arabic locally. To help such students memorize the Qur'an in a foreign language, Muslim teachers in Africa often employ ajami. Ajami is the transliteration of Arabic words into local, African languages. Today, there are more than 80 ajami scripts in use—written languages that constitute their own thriving intellectual traditions.<sup>5</sup>

At school, usually with black ink, students will write the verses they are studying in ajami or in Arabic on

small writing boards to help them memorize. In some places, once they have successfully recited the verses, they will wash the ink from the writing board with water, and then drink the liquid, to literally imbibe the Word of God.<sup>6</sup> Prayer accompanies study of the Qur'an, and so students sit cross-legged on the floor as they study instead of at desks, engaging in the movements that signal their bodily submission to God. Thus, students' relationship to their education is physical as much as it is mental. For this reason, historian Rudolph Ware III explains that "Islamic knowledge is embodied knowledge."<sup>7</sup> The whole body—the eyes, the voice, the hands, the knees, the back and the breath—are engaged in the physical and mental experience of learning. Unlike Western education, which assumes that learning occurs only with the mind, this pedagogical approach understands that our minds and our bodies are indivisible.

The goal of the early part of a Muslim student's education is to memorize the entire Qur'an, which is estimated to be almost 80,000 words long. Unlike American schools, students work at their own pace; without successfully reciting the verses for the teacher, they do not move on to the next step. Thus, instruction is individualized, resting again on that personal relationship between the master and the disciple.<sup>8</sup> If students successfully memorize the Qur'an, they can continue their studies at centers of higher learning which are connected to major mosques. Like



Western universities, these centers bring together scholars with deep knowledge of different fields, such as theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and political theory. Scholars, who are specialized in certain texts, will train students in the mastery of those texts, in turn certifying the successful students to teach that text to others. The chain of knowledge transmission continues, passed along from the master to the disciple, who in turn will collect his own students, forming a new link in that ever-growing chain.

So, let's close with our original question. How, and from whom, do you learn? And perhaps more importantly, what chain of knowledge transmission are you a part of?

1 Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, 204.

2 Henry Louis Gates Jr. in "Empires of Gold", episode three of *Africa's Great Civilizations* by PBS, 2017, 29:50 to 30:20.

3 Interview with Ousmane Kane by Elisa Prosperetti, "Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts," 24 September 2021, New Books Network, <https://newbooksnetwork.com/islamic-scholarship-in-africa-new-directions-and-global-contexts>.

4 Robert Launay, "Introduction," in *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, 13.

5 Ousmane Oumar Kane, "Introduction: Where have we been and where are we going in the Study of Islamic Scholarship in Africa?," in *Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts*.

6 Rudolph T. Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an*, 10.

7 Rudolph T. Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an*, 4.

8 Launay, "Introduction," 5.

## FURTHER READING/ CITATIONS

Kane, Ousmane Oumar. *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Kane, Ousmane Oumar. "Introduction: Where have we been and where are we going in the Study of Islamic Scholarship in Africa?," in *Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts*. New York: James Currey, 2021.

Launay, Robert. "Introduction." in *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016: 1–26.

Quinn, Virginia and Mark Bates, dirs. *Africa's Great Civilizations*. "Empires of Gold," episode 3. PBS, 2017.

Prosperetti, Elisa. Interview with Ousmane Kane. "Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts," 24 September 2021, New Books Network, <https://newbooksnetwork.com/islamic-scholarship-in-africa-new-directions-and-global-contexts>.

Ware III, Rudolph T. *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in Muslim West Africa*. Durham, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

## GLOSSARY

**Ajami** = Arabic script used for writing African languages

**Arbitrary** = chance

**Authentic** = genuine

**Erudition** = knowledge acquired chiefly from books

**Hierarchy** = ranking

**Mosque** = place of public worship by Muslims

**Orality** = spoken

**Pedagogy** = profession of teaching

**Prophet** = one who utters divinely inspired revelations

**Renowned** = famous

**Sacred** = holy

**Vindication** = proof that someone or something is right

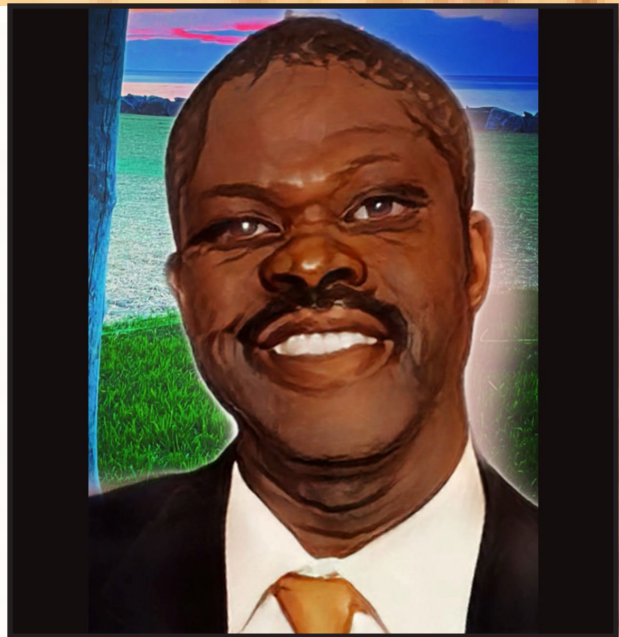


# *Master Disciple Instruction:*

## *The family of Ousmane Kane* by Ousmane Kane

Ousmane Kane is the Alwaleed Professor of Contemporary Islamic Religion and Society at Harvard Divinity School and Professor of African and African American Studies at the Faculty of Arts of Sciences at Harvard University. He belongs to a long lineage of West African scholars. He trained in Arabic and Islamic studies in Senegal, and received his master in Islamic Studies and PhD in Political Science in France. In his book *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*, he describes the Islamic West African Master/Disciple method of instruction that goes back hundreds of years:

“Unlike in modern universities, there was no central administration, no recruitment or graduation exam at the School level, and no school degree. University libraries as we know them now did not exist. However, teachers typically were very learned scholars, some of whom had studied in Egypt or in (regions south of the Sahara) with the highest intellectual authorities of their time. Many Timbuktu scholars possessed personal libraries of hundreds or thousands of books. Scholars offered instruction inside



Ousmane Kane (1955-)

mosques such as Sankore, Sidi Yahya, and Jingerer Ber, the largest mosque colleges in Timbuktu, but most scholars imparted knowledge to students in a special room in their own homes, which also housed their books. Masters delivered authorization to teach specific texts to their students.... The expectation still today is that a scholar – authorized by a famous master who himself is a former student of another famous master to transmit knowledge – will have more solid credentials than a scholar taught by a less famous master....”<sup>1</sup>



## Kane's Master Disciple Experience

“[W]hen I barely knew how to speak Wolof, my mother tongue, I had been enrolled in a school to learn Arabic and the Qur'an. As it turned out, the school had no classroom. Schooling took place in the yard of our family home in Dakar, and the teacher was none other than my own mother .... I woke up around 6 am to perform the first of the five daily Muslim prayers and then to study a set of verses of the Quran at home; at 7:45 am, it was time to walk to the Ecole Clemenceau [the secular public school where instruction was offered in French]. At noon, the beginning of the break at Clemenceau, I returned home to resume Quranic studies and have a brief lunch. At 2:45 pm, it was time to walk back to Clemenceau. The school day at Clemenceau ended at 5pm. But at 5:15 pm, when I arrived home from Clemenceau, I would right away resume Quranic studies until the Muslim prayer of Maghreb, or sunset, around 7pm. Right after the prayer, I would do my public school homework with the help of my older siblings, I would have a short fifteen minute break for dinner and would go to bed between 10 and 11 pm after completing my homework. On Saturdays and Sundays and during the other school holidays such as Christmas and Easter (two weeks each), and over summer break (three months), I studied the Quran full time. When did I rest? Only at night! There was no other time to rest. My greatest childhood regret is never having

learned to play soccer, a very popular sport in urban Senegal in the 1960s.”<sup>2</sup>

## MOTHER OF OUSMANE KANE

Shaykha Mariam Niasse, the mother of Ousmane Kane, was one of Africa's best-known Islamic educators. She started her career as a Quranic teacher. She subsequently established several schools in Senegal, including Dar Al-Quran al-Karim, an Islamic institute that offers preschool to secondary education in Arabic and French. Tens of thousands of students have graduated from her schools in the last six decades.

Shaykha Mariam was also a leader in the Fayda Sufi movement, holding positions usually reserved for men. Additionally, she was well known for her political influence and skills as a diplomat.

Shaykha Mariam was the daughter of Aichatou Sarr and Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, one of the most influential Islamic



Shaykha Mariam Niasse (1932-2020)



scholars of the 20th century. Her erudite father would tell her and her sisters to combine housework and the study of Islamic sciences. All her sisters received sound training in the Islamic sciences. Her father hired a native Arabic-speaker from Mauritania to teach them Arabic to ensure classical Arabic pronunciation. He also insisted that his sons and daughters study the same curriculum. An advanced student, by the age of 14 Mariam began teaching at her Quranic school in Kaolack near her hometown of Kossi.

As a young woman Mariam accompanied her father on trips abroad. Her travel exposed her to a wider Islamic world that helped her to build a network of lasting relationships. After she married one of her father's disciples, Shaykha Mariam established her first school in their home. Creative and innovative, she used many strategies to help her students learn the Qur'an and the Arabic language. Soon they were reciting the Qur'an in world competitions. Their outstanding performances caught the attention of many. Parents from various countries sent their children to study with her. Wealthy Muslims donated funds to help her expand her schools. She also continued to teach at home. Her pupils included her grandchildren, orphans she adopted, and a host of young people. who called her Yaay-Bóoy (Mummy) or more respectfully Séydaa Yaay-Bóoy.<sup>3</sup>

### **GRANDFATHER OF OUSMANE KANE**

Shaykh Ibrahim Adbullah Niasse, the father of Shaykha Mariam Niasse and maternal grandfather of Ousmane Kane, was born in rural Senegal. He came from a long line of Islamic scholars. At an early age Ibrahim mastered a curriculum of math, astronomy, geography, law, the



Shaykh Ibrahim Abdullah Niasse (1900-1975)

Hadith, and Sufism. He gained acclaim due to his mastery of the Qur'an. He received his entire education from his father. Speaking about his education he said, "I learned Qur'an and Hadith first from my shaykh, my father, and he, from his father. I received an 'ijaza first from my father in both Qur'an and Hadith, then from Abdur-Rahman alHajj-'Alawi (Mauritania) and another 'ijaza from Shaykh Ahmad Sukayrij (Morocco) who himself had earned some six hundred 'ijazas from six hundred different shaykhs whose names are mentioned in his book..."<sup>4</sup>

The author of many books, Shaykh Ibrahim has been described as among the most influential and versatile Sufi authors of the twentieth century. He attracted students from many parts of West Africa and his followers numbered in the millions. He headed the single largest Muslim organization in West Africa by the end of European rule.<sup>5</sup>

In a speech in the 1960s, Shaykh Ibrahim addressed a group of Muslim youth,



"For the youth, I thank you all for your papers. And I am here to tell you to go ahead and be in the vanguard of things. Surely the future of every nation is based on its youth. But it is not based upon all of them, not upon every individual, but only on the intellectual ones, the educated ones with good character, good manners, and zeal. As for the youth lacking education and good character, he is like a seed unfertilized. So make every effort to seek and do your best to acquire more knowledge, not only Islamic knowledge, not only mathematics and its branches, but also be part of and cooperate with those whose zeal is to discover the unknown and unseen things of this world." <sup>6</sup>

### ***GREAT GRANDFATHER OF OUSMANE KANE***

One of the most knowledgeable scholars of early colonial Senegal, El Hadj



Abd Allah Niasse

Abdoulaye Niasse was born in 1848 in Béli in the Djolof (central Senegal) and died in Kaolack in 1922. It is with his father Muhammad Niasse who also was a scholar that he began his education by memorizing the Quran. He subsequently pursued his higher Islamic studies with his maternal uncle Ibrahima Thiam known as Serigne Kellel (1789-1890) who initiated him into the Tijaniyya Tariqa. He then studied with Fandiaye Niana in Mbam Laghem the exegesis of the Holy Quran, theology, morphology and Arabic syntax. In 1865, Abdallah Niasse emigrated with his father from Djolof to Saloum where he founded the village of Taïba Niassène. He renewed his initiation to the Tijaniyya with a lieutenant of El Hadj Oumar Tall, Mouhamad ibn Ibrahim Diallo.

By the time he undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1890, he was a confirmed scholar. On his way to the Holy Land, he transited to Egypt in 1890. As was customary for African pilgrims transiting to Egypt, he met and exchanged at length with scholars of Al-Azhar Mosque College who awarded him licenses certifying his competence in Islamic sciences (ijaza). In 1910, he moved to Kaolack and his house became a crossroads where scholars from West Africa and Morocco passed through. He subsequently made the pilgrimage to Fez the mother zawiya (the spiritual center) of the Tijaniyya where he was awarded the itlaq or supreme consecration to the Tariqa Tijaniyya (Sufi order). Upon his return to Senegal until his death, he worked tirelessly to spread Islam and the Tijaniyya Tariqa. Many influential scholars were trained in his school. He is the author of many treatises. He also maintained links with scholars from all over the Muslim world and the best proof is his biography written by a Mauritanian scholar and entitled Mutrib sami'in.



## CONCLUSION

As the study of the lineage of scholars from which Ousmane Kane came demonstrates, the history of Islamic scholarship in West Africa is very old. Prior to European colonial rule, it was the Arabic language and Ajami (African languages transcribed with Arabic script) that served as the vehicle for Islamic scholarship. From the second half of the 20th century, the introduction of Western languages in Africa transformed the modalities of knowledge transmission. Islamic educators adopted the methods and pedagogy of the Western school. Some Muslims, such as in the family of Ousmane Kane, attended both the Western school and the Quranic school.

A considerable mass of Islamic writings is now produced in Western languages, a phenomenon accentuated by the settlement of tens of millions of Muslims in the West at the turn of the 20th century. Like his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, Ousmane Kane, in parallel to his academic teaching and research activities, also works in the dissemination of Islamic teaching and the Tijaniyya tariqa. He founded a Tijaniyya zawiya in Massachusetts registered as the Islamic Society for Spiritual Cultivation where participants meet regularly to practice dhikr. He organizes an annual pilgrimage to Sufi centers in Africa.

Ousmane Kane also teaches Islamic spirituality in his zawiya and introduces interested people to Sufism, particularly to the Tijaniyya tariqa. This is because in Islam, academic research and spiritual development are intimately linked.

- 1 Kane, Beyond Timbuktu , 12
- 2 Kane, Beyond Timbuktu , 3
- 3 Hill, Women Who Are Men
- 4 Tumblr.com
- 5 Kane, Beyond Timbuktu , 4
- 6 Tumblr.com

## SOURCES

Hill, Joseph. "Women Who Are Men: Shaykha Maryam Niasse and the Qur'an in Dakar." *In Approaches to the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Zulfikar Hirji, 369–400. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kane, Ousmane O. *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

Kane, Ousmane O, *Islamic Scholarship in Africa. New Directions and Global Contexts* (London: James Currey, 2021).

"Shaykh Al-Islam Ibrahim Niasse." Tumblr.com <https://nasrulilmamerica-blog.tumblr.com/Shaykh%20Ibrahim>

## IMAGE CREDIT

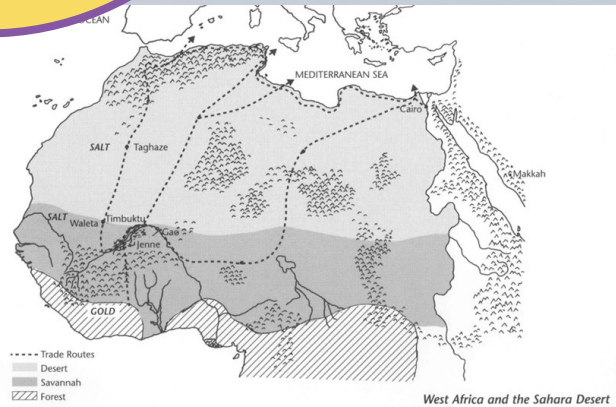
Wooden board on which talibe children learn: Wikimedia Commons





## Timbuktu: Muslim City of Scholars

by Susan Douglass



Timbuktu is a famous city in a country named Mali. People sometimes mention Timbuktu as the farthest place they can think of. "I'll go to Timbuktu and back if I have to!" You can learn about this faraway city. Learn how the city grew about a thousand years ago.

### SECTION 1: GEOGRAPHY

The city of Timbuktu is in West Africa. Timbuktu is just north of the Niger River. It is just south of the Sahara which means desert.

The weather in Timbuktu is dry. It rains only four months out of the year. Timbuktu is in a part of Africa called the Sahel. The Sahel is near the desert. Dry weather crops like millet and sorghum grow there as well as baobab and acacia trees. These crops and trees support people as well as cattle, sheep, goats and camels.

#### THE NIGER RIVER AND THE SAHEL

The Niger River flows past Timbuktu. The Niger is a long river in West Africa. It flows like a giant arch from west to east. Then the river flows south into the Atlantic Ocean. Its shape is like a rainbow.

Near Timbuktu, is the Niger

River bend. As the river turns south, its flow slows down. It divides into many small rivers that twist together like ropes. The Niger floods along the bend each year. The small rivers grow wide. The flood brings good fishing. It brings rich soil for farming. It brings grass to feed animals.

Long ago, West African people built villages along the Niger. They fished, farmed and herded animals. They had enough to eat. They had extra food to trade. They traded for other goods they needed. Some villages grew into cities.

#### Thinking About Section 1

Why is Timbuktu's location good for building a city?

### SECTION 2: TIMBUKTU GREW WITH TRADE

People on the Niger traded their goods for salt and other products including horses, books, cloth and copper. People needed



salt to stay healthy and preserve food. Traders brought salt from mines in the Sahara. Salt trade helped the city grow.

Gold also helped the city grow. Coins and jewelry are made of gold. It lasts a long time. People all over the world want gold. Traders brought gold from the Bambuk and Bure goldfields in the west and mines in the forest to the south of Timbuktu. Gold helped make Timbuktu famous.

Almost 1000 years ago, cities in West Africa began to grow. People of the Sahara came to trade. They traded for food from Niger villages. Others brought gold to trade for salt. Gold came by river boat.

#### DESERT TRAVELERS

The Sahara lies north of Timbuktu. Travel across the Sahara is very hard. It is easy to get lost or die of thirst in the desert.

People called the Tuareg were skilled desert travelers. They kept herds of camels. A camel can go without water for a long time. It can walk on hot sand. It can carry heavy loads. The Tuareg led caravans with salt and other goods through the desert. They returned north with gold.

#### RIVER TRAVELERS

Timbuktu grew with other cities on the Niger. On the map, you can see Gao, Jenne, Tindirma and Dia. These were all

trading towns. Timbuktu's location helped it grow faster.

[The map](#) shows Timbuktu on the edge of the desert. It is the farthest city north of the Niger. Just beside Timbuktu is Kabara, a port on the river. A port is a place where boats stop. Mules carried goods from Kabara to Timbuktu's markets. Timbuktu was a good stop for river traders. It was a good stop for desert traders, too.

#### TRADE IN TIMBUKTU

Caravans brought salt to Timbuktu each year. They brought horses, cloth, copper, books and paper from other lands. Boats brought gold down the river from the forest. They brought goods up the river from other cities. Mules carried goods from Kabara's port to Timbuktu.

Gold and salt were the most important goods. Farmers sold food in Timbuktu's markets. Grain was an important trade crop. Dried fish, vegetables, and fruits fed people in the city. Herders brought cattle and hides to trade. Wool from sheep, goats and camels was sold to make cloth. Farmers grew cotton to sell. Cotton was made into light clothes for the hot climate. (Horses were also important, second to salt in some places, due to need for cavalry)

#### **Thinking About Section 2**

Name three kinds of goods traded at Timbuktu. Why was each kind important to people?

What kinds of transportation would you see if you visited Timbuktu long ago?

### **SECTION 3: ISLAM CAME TO WEST AFRICA**

Traders brought more than goods to West Africa. North African traders





brought Islam. Since about 1100, when the city began to grow, Timbuktu has been a Muslim city.

Muslim traders spread Islam by example. They prayed five times a day. Traders prayed outdoors near the markets at first. Later, they built mosques in towns they visited.

Islam teaches traders to be fair and honest. They must weigh and measure goods correctly. They must count money correctly. Traders should write contracts to help them remember. Muslim courts and judges helped people when they disagreed over trade or family matters.

Traders and leaders in West Africa began to follow Islam. Farmers, herders and others followed their example. In time, parts of West Africa were mostly Muslim. In other parts of West Africa, people continued to practice local religions. Islam has a long history in Africa. During the lifetime of Muhammad, his followers were persecuted by their own people. They were granted refuge from persecution by King Armah, who ruled the Kingdom of Aksum (present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea) from 614–631 CE.

#### MUSLIM SCHOLARS IN TIMBUKTU

West Africans began to study about Islam. They learned to read and

write Arabic. They built schools, brought in scholars of Islam from other lands, and studied to become scholars themselves. Scholars are people who study for a long time. People studied the Qur'an, Islam's holy book. They learned and wrote about Islamic law. They learned many other subjects, too. Every important family in the city educated some of its own members. People gave money to educate poor people, too.

People often asked questions of Muslim scholars. They asked about family problems. Traders and others came to scholars to ask questions and seek advice about their affairs. The scholars served as judges. They led the prayers in the mosque, or Muslim house of worship. They helped solve arguments. They made sure that trade was fair. They wrote contracts for land and goods.

Muslim scholars governed the city for a long time. Timbuktu's leaders and rulers were scholars from important families in the city. They met with other scholars to decide on rules and laws. They decided if the laws were true to the teachings of Muhammad.

#### LEARNING AND TEACHING IN TIMBUKTU

Where Islam spread, a new tradition of learning followed. A tradition is something people keep doing over time. Learning and teaching, reading and writing are very important. The Arabic language reached West Africa with Islam. West Africans spoke many African languages. Arabic became the main language of learning in West Africa. Timbuktu's scholars spoke and wrote Arabic. Timbuktu's children learned to recite the Qur'an in Arabic. They went to a teacher's home or to the masjid. They learned Arabic letters -- alif, ba, ta.

They copied the Qur'an onto wooden boards covered with clay. Paper was very expensive and had to be imported. First, the teacher scratched writing onto the board. Students filled in the letters with ink. They memorized the letters and words. They recited for the teacher. They held the boards out of sight on their heads. Students of all ages studied together. Older students helped the younger ones.

Many people in Timbuktu learned some reading and writing. Rich families had money for more schooling. Poor families paid the teacher with food or other goods. They worked in exchange for lessons.

Some students found other ways to learn. Some learned a craft to earn money. In Timbuktu, most tailors were also scholars. Tailors cut, sewed and sold clothes. They stitched beautiful designs



Learning the Qur'an was very important for West African Muslims. Young boys practiced writing Arabic with ink on wooden boards. The boards were covered with smooth clay. When finished, the ink and clay was washed off into a special pot. The board then got a new coating of clay.

onto cloth. During part of the day, they studied. Timbuktu's tailors were important people in the city. They also served as scribes. Scribes are like secretaries. They write for people who cannot. Other scholars earned money as teachers. Women learned and worked in trade, too.

Timbuktu had many circles of scholars. More knowledge meant more respect. Most families included some scholars. The highest scholars came from a few families. These families passed down knowledge to their children. The judges and imams came from the more educated and wealthy families. They helped to rule the city.

The largest mosques were centers of Islamic learning. Students also studied at scholars' homes. Teachers and students were everywhere in Timbuktu. Scholars bought books for their libraries. Books from far across the desert were very expensive. Scholars shared the rare books.

#### ISLAMIC LEARNING AND TRADE KEPT TIMBUKTU SAFE

Kings and leaders in West Africa felt proud of Timbuktu. They hoped people would think, "A land with great cities has a great leader." Muslim visitors came to Timbuktu. They wrote that Timbuktu was a great and rich city. They described the markets—especially the trade in gold. They told about the scholars. They told about the large mosques. They brought back books written by Timbuktu's scholars from their travels.

Timbuktu's trade grew wider, too. Traders came from far away to buy and sell. They sent new kinds of goods. They heard that the city was safe. They heard that Timbuktu's markets were fair.



Scholars and crafts people made money in trade. Traders large and small shared the busy markets. A rich city made the kingdom rich. A proud city made the kingdom proud. Trade and traders need peace to do business. The rulers kept the peace in Timbuktu. For a long time, kings sent no armies to the city. They left Timbuktu to grow rich.

### **Thinking About Section 3**

Who brought Islam to West Africa?

What important work did scholars do in Timbuktu?

Why are learning and teaching important to Muslims?

Why were West African leaders proud of Timbuktu? What kept the city safe for a long time?

## **SECTION 4: HOW THE CITY OF TIMBUKTU LOOKED**

Timbuktu lay between the Niger delta and the Sahara. The color of Timbuktu was the color of the land. In the sunshine, it might look like gold. The houses were built from earth, since wood was scarce.

Where it doesn't rain much, clay is good for building. Clay houses stay cool in summer. They are warm at night, when the dry air is cool. Wood was used only for roofs, doors and windows.

Brick makers mixed chopped grass with river clay. They put the clay in molds and dried it in the sun. The bricks dried in a few days.

Masons are workers who lay bricks. Masons were respected and important workers in Timbuktu. Masons made bricks into walls. They joined the bricks with clay. Then they plastered the walls until they were smooth inside and out. After each rainy season, masons repaired any cracks.



*The open space in front of the masjid becomes a market. Women sell baskets, fish, vegetables, cloth, meat and other goods. Awnings shade buyers and sellers from the hot sun. Markets were one place where people from many parts of the city met. Muslim judges helped settle disputes and keep Islamic laws of fair trade.*

They made the walls smooth again.

### **BUILDING WAREHOUSES**

Markets were held outdoors. The first large buildings in Timbuktu were warehouses. A warehouse is a building used to store goods. Tuareg traders made a few trips a year across the desert. Before leaving again, they stored goods in Timbuktu. They kept goods with people of another ethnic group in Timbuktu. The people kept their goods safe until the Tuaregs' return.

As the city grew, markets and warehouses grew larger. The main market in Timbuktu moved several times. There were markets for different goods. New settlers built houses in new parts of the city. On the edge of the city, caravans camped with tents and animals.

## BUILDING MOSQUES

The biggest buildings in Timbuktu were mosques. They rose high above the city. There were three great mosques, called Jingerebir and Sankore, and Sidi Yahya, as well as smaller neighborhood mosques. For Friday prayers, people went to the largest mosque in the city.

Kings gave money to build mosques in Timbuktu. Mansa Musa, king of Mali, brought back an architect whom he met in Makkah. He built a masjid in Timbuktu. Traders, scholars and judges gave money for the mosques. Poor people offered to work on the mosques. They helped the masons. They collected wood and carried earth. They made bricks and hauled them.



Masons were very important workers in West African towns and cities. Masons here build the masjid at Sankore. They use ladders to reach the top of walls. Towers, or minarets have wooden beams built into them, making them look like porcupines. That way, workers can reach every part of the walls. That is important, since the building needs a new coat of mud plaster each year after the rainy season.

## DIFFERENT GROUPS LIVE AND WORK TOGETHER

Cities are places where people meet and live together. People from different groups came to Timbuktu. Tuaregs founded the city. Malinke traders joined them. Fulani, Soninke, Songhai, Bella and Amazigh were other groups. They lived in Timbuktu. They spoke different languages.

These groups mixed together in the markets. They sat together in the Qur'an schools and centers of learning. They married into each other's families. Leaders met to talk about the city's needs. Judges from different ethnic groups governed the city. Many different groups traded, built and made things in the city. Their work made the city grow.

## THE SHAPE OF THE CITY

Timbuktu was shaped like a triangle. It had several neighborhoods. In each part of the city, different groups lived. People from the same groups and families liked to live together. They spoke the same language. They shared a way of life. Each neighborhood had its own mosque, large or small. Each neighborhood had different crafts and jobs.

People came from all parts of the city for the Juma' prayer. They left their neighborhoods to work, study and visit. They learned to know people from other groups. They married into other families.

Some leaders had very large homes. They had many visitors each day. They had more money for building. Most people lived in medium and small homes. The poorest had homes at the edge of the city. Caravans camped at the city's edge,



too.

About 500 years ago, Timbuktu may have had a population of 30,000 to 50,000 people. Today, Timbuktu is much smaller than it was long ago. After the discovery of gold and silver in the New World, trade routes shifted to the Atlantic coast, and trade declined in Timbuktu. Timbuktu's proud tradition still lives on to enrich the world.

### **Thinking About Section 4**

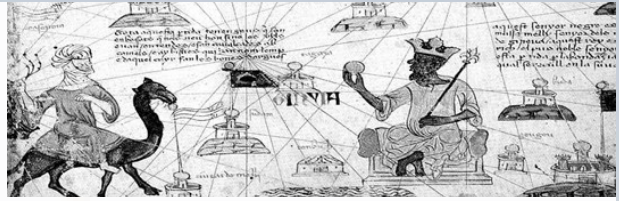
You are a master mason. Tell someone how to build a large house with clay and straw. (Use the pictures to help you.) What were the most important buildings in the city? What helped groups mix together in city life? What kept them apart?

## **SECTION 5: TIMBUKTU BECAME WORLD-FAMOUS**

Long ago, people outside Africa began to learn about Timbuktu. News travels quickly among traders. People heard about Africa's gold and other goods. News about Muslim scholars and kings came to other lands. People began to dream about visiting the faraway city.

### **THE HAJJ OF MANSA MUSA**

Mansa Musa was a Muslim king of Mali. He ruled the lands around the Niger River. In 1324, he made hajj (a religious journey to Makkah, sometimes spelled Mecca). Thousands of people went with his caravan. They carried many camel-loads of gold. On their way to Makkah, in the Arabian Peninsula, the travelers stopped in Egypt. Musa gave rich gifts to Egypt's ruler. Mansa Musa and the people with him bought things with gold dust,



gold pieces and gold coins. People on their route had never seen so much gold before.

Mansa Musa came back from Makkah with a plan. He brought back scholars and an architect to Mali. He gave money for the great mosque. He brought books for the African Muslim scholars. He built many other buildings in Timbuktu.

Mansa Musa's journey became famous far beyond Africa. The story spread to Europe and through the Muslim lands. Other West African kings such as Askia Muhammad made hajj, too. The journeys brought more trade and learning to Timbuktu.

### **MUSLIM SCHOLARS FROM AFRICA**

Some of Timbuktu's scholars went to other Muslim lands. Some studied with famous teachers. Some wrote books. Traders took their books to other lands. Muslims in many lands heard about scholars in Timbuktu.

Scholars in Timbuktu wrote about their city. They wrote about its families of scholars. They wrote about its trade and leaders. In the 1600's, Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sa'di wrote a history of Muslim West Africa. Ahmad Baba wrote about law and history. These books tell us about West Africa long ago. They tell about its rulers, its troubles and its people. They tell us what its people thought and did.

### **GEOGRAPHERS AND TRAVELERS SPREAD KNOWLEDGE**

Famous Muslim travelers visited Timbuktu and other West African cities. In the 1300s, a world traveler named Ibn Battuta wrote a famous book about it.

Muslim geographers also wrote about West Africa. Their names are al-Zuhri and al-Bakri. They lived and wrote almost 1000 years ago. Ibn Khaldun wrote about it in his history book. Leo Africanus, a Moroccan scholar, was captured by pirates about 500 years ago. He was taken to Europe. There, he wrote a book about Timbuktu and other places in Africa.

### PEOPLE IN EUROPE IMAGINED "GOLDEN" TIMBUKTU

In Europe, Timbuktu became famous long ago. People in Europe knew about African gold. They bought much gold from North African traders. Europeans struck coins from African gold, and used the precious metal in jewelry and gold thread for fabrics, and beat it into thin pieces of gilt used in rich paintings. Artists used this gilt to honor religious figures in paintings, for example. The story of Mansa Musa's hajj to Makkah reached all the way to Europe. People thought Timbuktu was a "city of gold." They did not know if it was real or make-believe.

Long ago, few people from Europe traveled to Africa. They hardly traveled at



all. They did not know the shape of the land or rivers. They did not know much about Africa. They knew only stories about "golden" Timbuktu.

Leo Africanus was a Muslim from Spain. His Arabic name was Hassan al-Wazzan. In the 1500s, he visited Timbuktu. He later told some people in Europe about the city. They were curious about the city because of its gold. They heard stories about a golden city of learning in the desert.

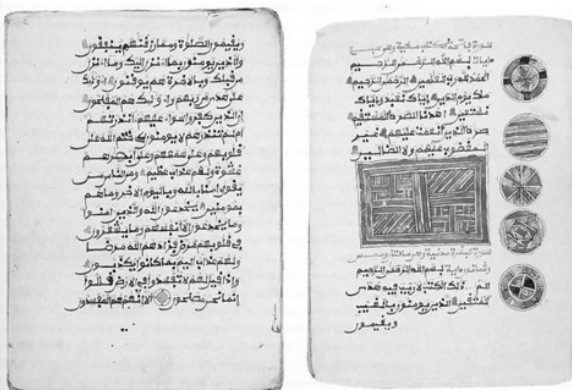
For the next 300 years, travelers from Europe tried to reach Timbuktu. Many lost their lives on the journey. In the 1800s, explorers reached the city and wrote about it. They found that Timbuktu was not made of gold. It was a place of earthen houses, great mosques, and the great Niger River.

Today, you can read about Timbuktu in books and magazines. You can learn about it from television. Tourists and other visitors can see the city. Many people have seen pictures of Timbuktu's great mosques

### Thinking About Section 5

How did people in other lands learn about Timbuktu long ago?

How can we find out about Timbuktu's past and present?





# *Timbuktu: Muslim City of Scholars*

## WORDS

**port** = a place where boats stop

**grain** = important crops like millet and sorghum were grown in Mali. Other grains like wheat, corn, and oats were grown in other parts of Africa and the world, used to make cereals, bread and feed animals

**scholar** = person who studies for a long time

**Shari'ah** = Islamic law, from the Qur'an and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad

**Sunnah** = the life and practice of Prophet Muhammad, whose example Muslims try to follow

**tradition** = something people keep doing over time

**tailor** = person who cuts, sews and sells clothing

**scribe** = person who reads and writes for people who cannot

**trader** = person who buys and sells goods

**warehouse** = a building used to store goods

**mosque** = a building where Muslims pray, called a masjid in Arabic language

**judge** = person who hears arguments between people and decides who is right

**mason** = person who builds with bricks

# PEOPLE

## Ethnic groups:

Tuareg  
Malinke  
Fula or Fulbe  
Amazigh  
Soninke  
Songhai

## Names:

Bella  
Mansa Musa  
Askia Muhammad  
Ibn Battuta  
Leo Africanus  
Ahmad Baba  
Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di

# PLACES

Sahara Sahel  
Niger River  
Mali

## Other cities near Timbuktu:

Kabara  
Jenne  
Gao  
Tindirma  
Dia



# The Horse in Medieval West Africa

by Brenda Randolph



"Horses have been – and are – far more abundant, more diverse, and more important in tropical Africa than the majority of us think."

~ Naish, Darren. "Domestic Horses of Africa." *Scientific American*, 10 May 2015, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/tetrapod-zoology/domestic-horses-of-africa/> Accessed 14 Nov. 2022.

## HORSES & EMPIRE-BUILDING

Horses played important roles in medieval West Africa. Kings and wealthy people purchased horses to create calvaries or for personal use. In medieval Timbuktu, Mali horses were the second most sought after trade item after salt. Horses enabled rulers to build calvaries, defeat their enemies and build empires. During the time of medieval Mali, one horse sold for 40 to 50 mithqāls of gold, the equivalent today of \$10,000. Horses were imported and bred domestically. Popular breeds included the Barb, Dongola, Arabian, Abyssian, Fleuve, and Mbayar.

## HORSES AND ADORNMENT

The Arab historian Al- Bakri interviewed traders who had visited the Ghana kingdom in the 11th century. The traders described

the king as "splendidly dressed and flanked by ten horses covered with gold-embroidered materials." Medieval terracotta horse sculptures show horses wearing elaborate bells and bridals. Several centuries later the Turkish scholar al-Halabī (1361-1450) wrote that Mansa Musa appeared on horseback magnificently dressed in the midst of his 10,000 soldiers.

The tradition of dressed horses and horsemen continues today in West Africa, especially in northern Nigeria. Every year in Kano and Katsina townspeople organize the Durbar Horse Festival. Beautifully dressed horsemen and horses in matching outfits join a parade to honor the emir and strengthen community ties. The festival provides a window into the medieval past and the type of attention West Africans have paid to their horses for centuries.

# Activity: Make Your Horse!

## STEPS

1. View the [Horses in Africa Gallery](#), "[Kano Durbar Horsefestival](#)", [Horse Breeds Pictures](#) to get ideas about creating your horse.
2. Select a [horse template](#) or draw a horse freestyle.

## ART MATERIALS

Cardboard or Manilla Folders 8 x 11  
Colored pencils, markers, or tempera paint  
White coffee filters, colored paper, felt or cloth  
Ribbons, beads, glitter, sequins, etc.



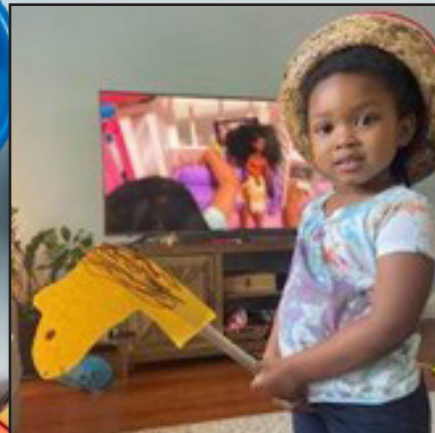
Bonnie M.



Khalea R.



Mark R.



Sanaadwe O.

## SHARE WITH US!

Have an adult guardian email a high-resolution image of your horse to [brenda.randolph@howard.edu](mailto:brenda.randolph@howard.edu).  
Include your name, age, and the following statement:  
*I give Africa Access and the Center for African Studies at Howard University to publish my horse online.*

[cfas.howard.edu/bouctou](https://cfas.howard.edu/bouctou)