

Toward an intellectual history of West Africa: the meaning of Timbuktu

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Cheikh Anta Diop, the well-known Senegalese historian, once wrote that centuries before Europe colonised the continent and questioned the primitive character of African ‘mentality’, Aristotelian logic was being discussed by local African scholars in places like Timbuktu. Here are Diop’s exact words: ‘Four centuries before Levy-Bruhl wrote his *Primitive Mentality* [also known by the title *How Natives Think*] Black Muslim Africa was commenting on Aristotle’s “formal logic” and was devoted to dialectics.’¹ I shall question Diop’s affirmation later in the chapter, but let me just, for the moment, comment on its general meaning. What Diop was saying is that it is impossible to give a proper account of the history of philosophy in the African continent while ignoring totally the significance of the penetration of Islamic knowledge in Africa. Because of this ignorance (and I take this word to mean both ‘lack of knowledge’ and ‘dismissal’), the intellectual history of Africa in general, beyond the particular case of philosophy and logic, is still a widely open field to be studied. And this needs to be done in the light of the Islamisation of many African regions, a process that became an important factor in sub-Saharan Africa around the eleventh century. Such a study would put an end to the preconceived notion that African cultures are oral cultures in essence; that Africanity is, at its very core, orality. What Timbuktu and other places where Islamic scholarship was developed teach us is to have a sense of history that opposes this identification of Africa with orality, a generalisation which is just not accurate. Of course orality is important in all cultures and especially in Africa. But we should not ignore that the graphic rationality of Islam has meant, in many areas, the adoption of Arabic, or rather Arabic script, by populations who, among other consequences of their conversion to the Muslim religion, literally rewrote who they were and created a written intellectual tradition that we need to study. Wolof, Fulfulde, Hausa and Bambara ceased to be oral languages at the very moment when some people, trained in the Arabic script in Qur’anic schools, started writing chronicles, myths and praise

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Throughout West Africa, Qur'anic schools associated with mosques educate children and youth in Muslim philosophy and the art of calligraphy. Characters written in ink or charcoal are easily washed off the wooden boards, providing a fresh surface for additional exercises.

poetry in these languages. And a new era of African intellectual history was opened when scholars such as those who authored the manuscripts in Timbuktu and elsewhere started writing didactic poetry and prose on jurisprudence, theology, Sufism and other areas, both in the Arabic language and sometimes in their native tongue.

This chapter will consider three points in relation to Timbuktu, the best testimony and symbol of this written tradition: the first is what I have called the significance of Islamisation as self-rewriting; in the second part the focus is on the discipline of philosophy in order to show how ignorance of the written tradition represented by Timbuktu has led to the ill-posed question of African philosophy as a debate between ethno-philosophers and euro-philosophers; in the third part I study one example of a work that represents the intellectual atmosphere of Timbuktu – *Tuhfat al-fudala bi ba'di fada'il al 'ulama* (The Gift of the Noble Ones Regarding Some of the Virtues of the Scholars). I conclude with a short lesson that we can draw from that work by the most prestigious Timbuktu scholar: Ahmad Baba (1556–1627/963–1037).

Conversions: Islamisation as self-rewriting

Conversion is not only entering a new religion with its creed, dogmas and rituals. As the Latin etymology indicates, to convert is to get totally turned around. That means a new self-reappraisal following the adoption of a new cosmology. One visible aspect of conversions has been a radical change in the discourse of identity. This is the case with the Islamised rewriting of certain epics, for example that of the Mande. Seydou Camara, in a lecture given in Timbuktu on Islam and West Africa and titled 'Islam and the historical tradition in the Mande' (*Islam et tradition historique au Manden*),² has indicated that the Jabate from the centre of Kela have a written version of a narrative that presents the new Islamic cosmology of the Mande people as constituted by the following phases:

- The creation of the universe and the origins of Humanity.
- The conquest of Khaybar
- The beginnings of the *mansaya* [monarchy] in the Mande
- The saga of Sunjata
- The mottos and genealogies of the heroes of the main Mande clans
- The list of the thirty Mande 'families'
- The settlement and hegemony of the Keyita Kandasi in the Niger valley.³

What we see in this succession of episodes, mixing myths of origins and historical facts such as the conquest of Khaybar or the beginnings of the Mande *mansaya*, is what I call – using a word coined by French orientalist and philosopher Henry Corbin – the projection of 'hiero-history' on the plane of history. By this I mean that the Mande people rewrite their own history in continuity with a sacred narrative (hiero-narrative) within which it acquires a totally new sense. In this case we see how Mande identity is linked to an event that functions as a founding myth in Muslim faith and from which it now derives its reality and meaning: the battle and victory of Khaybar. That battle was one of the great military victories of the early Muslim community during which 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, especially, distinguished himself as the hero who overtook the reputed inexpugnable fortress of Khaybar. Now, in the rewriting of their origins, the Mande present themselves as the descendants of the royalty from Khaybar who converted to Islam after the episode of their military defeat. The function of this narrative is quite clear. First, it transforms the conversion of the Mande to Islam and its cosmology into an epic which took place at the very beginning of the Muslim religion as part of the Islamic early saga in the Arabian Peninsula. Second, it legitimises the *mansaya* as the continuation of an ancient tradition of royalty in Khaybar (a process of legitimisation which is the usual role of myths). This kind of self-rewriting is not limited to the Mande people. The same pattern is to be found also in the written chronicles of the Fulani people in Futa Jallon or Futa Toro: a new origin Islamised by its linkage to the dawn of Islam in Arabia. Seydou Camara and others have read this kind of self-rewriting as a sign that the people who converted were ashamed of their pagan origin and therefore

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It is important to look at the global meaning of a radically new cosmology where the beginning of the world itself is different and demands a different narrative to account for the way in which the community now fits in a totally different space and time. The self-rewriting process is a deep reorganisation and reappraisal of the social imagination. The importance of the manuscripts we are dealing with is that they bear witness to such a process.

invented new ancestries when the literate among them decided to fabricate oriental connections.⁴ I do not think that that is the whole story. It is more important to look at the global meaning of a radically new cosmology where the beginning of the world itself is different and demands a different narrative to account for the way in which the community now fits in a totally different space and time, that of the *umma*, the Muslim global world. The self-rewriting process is a deep reorganisation and reappraisal of the social imagination that occurred in West Africa. The importance of the manuscripts we are dealing with is that they bear witness to such a process, to which a good intellectual history of the region must pay careful attention.

One crucial aspect of the new cosmology which calls for particular attention is a new philosophy of time that marks a turning point in the intellectual history of the Bilad al-Sudan (land of the black people), as the region was called. This philosophy of time can be perceived in the famous Sudanese chronicles emblematic of the Timbuktu manuscripts: the *Tarikh al-Sudan* by ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sa’di and the *Tarikh al-fattash* by Mahmud b. Mutawakkil Ka’ti. Beside their immense value as sources for the history of Mali and the Songhay, these narratives about the societies of West Africa – weaving together dynastic evolutions, collective movements, sociological considerations, the philosophy of history, biographies or genealogies – express a philosophy of becoming, a thought of time as creative movement. In the *Tarikh al-fattash*, for example, we read that ‘what led God to cast the Songhay state into chaos, what brought to its citizens the punishment they were laughing about until then, was the inobservance of the laws of God, the injustice of the servants, the arrogance of the elite’.⁵ And that:

during the time of Ishaq, the city of Gao had reached the extreme limit of immorality; the worst crimes, the most disagreeable actions to God’s sight were openly committed while the ugliest misdeeds were on display. The situation had reached the point where a[n] officer had been designated to attend to issues of adultery, with a drum specially made for him, and the different parties would present to him their cases against each other. Many other things were going on that would bring dishonor to those who would dare mention them. To God we belong, and to Him we will return.⁶

‘Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi rajiun’ – this Qur’anic quote by which al-Sa’di concludes his lament summarises the underlying philosophy of time and history pervasive in his chronicle: the course of human events carries with itself, as by some immanent justice, its divine sanction and the inobservance of the laws of God inevitably leads to decline and chaos.

The question of African philosophy

I consider my second point by first raising the question of the way in which African philosophy has now become an academic discipline. First there was GWF Hegel, the German philosopher, who decided that historicity and philosophy were the distinctive, specific characters of Europe and only Europe. As a consequence, he wiped Africa out of history and denied any possibility that the black continent could have produced anything comparable to a thought. Exiled from reason, civilisation, true monotheistic religion and philosophical thinking, Africa, according to Hegel, was barely the primitive stammering of humanity, enveloped, as it was, 'in the dark mantle of the night' – a spiritual night, needless to say. This did not apply to all of Africa, though – only to what he called 'Africa proper', namely sub-Saharan Africa. Egypt and its civilisation were of course excised by him from the rest of the continent and linked to Asia while North Africa, the Maghrib, was also to be detached from it and linked to Europe – where it truly belonged albeit in a derived way – through the promising event of colonialism (Hegel saw its promise when in 1830 the French took control of Algiers, an event he saluted). The only good thing that could then happen to Africa proper was, on the one hand, European slavery, an evil per se but still a way of putting the uprooted African populations in the new context of civilisation where they could develop beyond any possibility available in the 'dark continent'; and, on the other hand, another possible civilising influence was seen by Hegel to be Islam.

After Hegel, the stage was dominated by the ethnological paradigm. The 'mentality' of the Africans (their mental activities could not be dignified with a word like 'thought') was studied in some continuity with Hegelianism given the premise that this mentality was considered to function as the 'other' of reason and philosophical spirit. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl distinguished himself in the enterprise of characterising the natives' mentality as foreign to 'our' logic, 'our' rationality and 'our' capacity to think and live by a consistent system of sound principles. In a third phase, around World War Two, still within the ethnological paradigm, this Lévy-Bruhlian line of thought was challenged by Africanists who claimed that African customary law, customs, ethics and so on were to be fully understood only if seen as stemming from a coherent set of philosophical principles expressing an original ontology. The notion of African philosophies was not an oxymoron any more. *Bantu Philosophy*, the well-known and loudly acclaimed book by Father Placide Tempels, appears as the model for all the works that were later published with titles such as *The Moral Philosophy of the Wolof*, *Akan Philosophy*, *Yoruba Philosophy* and so on. This phase was followed by another, when the ethnological paradigm itself was questioned. Ethno-philosophy, as it came to be disparagingly called, was criticised and dismissed as the wrong way of considering philosophical activity in Africa. Philosophy must be the written (not oral), individual (not collective), rational and critical thinking of a person presenting himself or herself as a philosopher, according to those who denounced ethno-philosophy. They were in turn accused of

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having uncritically embraced a Eurocentric definition of philosophy, thus begging the question of what philosophy is. Euro-philosophers versus ethno-philosophers – they established the debate on African philosophy in total ignorance of the written tradition of the kind that is revealed by the Timbuktu manuscripts.

The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah is right when he writes about philosophy in Africa: ‘Muslims have a long history of philosophical writing, much of it written in Africa, so that the study of philosophy can be seen as traditional (and therefore holy) and endogenous (and therefore nationalistic).’⁷ Recalling this simple fact, which was overlooked in the very terms of the debate about ethno-philosophy and African orality, is crucial when it comes to establishing the *history* of philosophical thinking on the continent. Appiah’s words echo the statement by Cheikh Anta Diop that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter and that I am now going to examine. The remark must be made that although Timbuktu and other similar intellectual centres were quite comparable to the best places of learning in the Islamic world at large in the same period, philosophy as a distinct discipline, the tradition known as *falsafa* among the Muslim sciences, had almost disappeared from the curriculum. *Falsafa* is what Greek philosophy became once it had been appropriated by Muslim scholars such as al-Farabi in the ninth century AD, Ibn Sina in the tenth, al-Ghazali in the eleventh and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in the twelfth, to name but the most famous. These philosophers contributed to the universal history of the discipline by pursuing a fruitful dialogue with the likes of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus from their own perspective, which is their Qur’anic culture. The tradition they created can be said to have declined after Averroes’s death in 1198. So one should not expect the Timbuktu manuscripts to reveal ground-breaking philosophical treatises about, say, crucial aspects of Aristotelism. This type of work was nowhere to be found in the Muslim world (at least the Sunni part of it) during the intellectual golden age of Mali or the Songhay. But that being said, one must not forget either that philosophy is an all-encompassing way of thinking which goes far beyond the disciplinary boundaries. If *falsafa* as such was not taught in the curriculum as we know it from the manuscripts and other testimonies, *kalam* (theology) was taught, as were *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and Sufism (mysticism) – and in all these sciences philosophical thinking is present – not to mention *mantiq* (logic), the science of valid reasoning, a foundational discipline among the *ulum al-din* (sciences of the religion), considered by the peripatetic followers of Aristotle as the *Organon*, the instrument for all knowledge in general.

Let me mention here the work of ‘Abd al-Qadir b. al-Mustafa al-Turudu, a nineteenth-century philosopher that we know of thanks to John Hunwick’s patient task of digging out the written intellectual heritage of Timbuktu. He was a nephew and student of the well-known scholar Muhammad Bello. Al-Turudu died in 1864. According to Hunwick’s compilation,⁸ his is an example of philosophic work in the pure tradition of *falsafa*, in particular his *Futuhat al-rabbaniyya* written in 1828–29 in which he proceeds to a ‘critical evaluation of the materialists’, naturalists’ and physicists’ perceptions of

Opposite: a manuscript discussing the celebration of the of the prophet Muhammad’s birthday, *Milad al-Nabi*.

فعند ما وقعها حملتها • بالمصطفى واستبشرها وجرحت
 ثم رجع أبو النبي الفداء • قال لها وقد حيثت للميراث
 قالت له فما صدقنا وعهدك • ابن الله • عذبت له من نورك
 قال لها فاه كما راى قرينك • ما أتيت وفعتها من ساعة
 قالت له ارجع الرور أباك • وقد مضى ما كان من بينك أباك

انرفد رأيت في الكتاب • علما يفتنا وهو الضوا
 اليوم حمل النبي الهداء • حتى الورى وأشرف العباد
 حتى الخلو أريج البواء • وخير من يسكن البلاء
 امنة تعلموا على كل الامم • وانه من يرضوا على كل علم

قال ورجع عنده الله الى امنة فاخبرها بانه الك وصارت امنة اذا
 مشيت على الحجر يثير تحت قدميها وغمامة النور تظل عليها والقاء
 من اليسر يفيض بين يديها **فالت** امنة بينما انا ليلت من رجز
 الليالي تايمت انا انا • امنة منا مني فقال يا امنة هل شعرت
 انك حملت وفالت كما اعلم فقال رجع حملت بسيد ولد • اجم
 وسيد هذه الامم وسيد الا وليرى والا خريف وطامع النيسر
 وستضربه منه هو نا محتونا كحومنا جاء اوضحه بسميه محمد
 بعض النظم الا قال اشترى لسائر الحمار **يقول**

The first lesson on the importance of knowledge is that the manuscripts must of course be preserved and catalogued, but turning them into sheer museum objects is not the ultimate goal. Meditation on African sciences and knowledge requires that the manuscripts, in Timbuktu and elsewhere, be published and made accessible to today's scholarship. The second lesson is a prophetic saying, quoted by Baba in *Tuhfat al-fudala*: 'The ink of the scholar is more precious than the blood of the martyr.'

life', considering also 'matters related to the transient nature of the world, existence or non-existence of the spirit and the nature of celestial spheres'.⁹

Conclusion: a few lessons from Timbuktu

I conclude this chapter by simply enumerating what I consider important lessons from Timbuktu. The first lesson is the one to be drawn from the fact that science and scholarship in Africa have a history prior to colonialism and prior to the introduction of European languages. The manuscripts are not only in Arabic. They are also in local languages using Arabic script. When African philosophers, for example, discuss questions of translation or the transformation of African languages into philosophical languages, they should first remember that this is a process that happened at different periods in the history of this discipline to many different languages through their contact with Greek philosophy: Latin with Cicero, Arabic with the Nestorian translators of Aristotle and Plato, French with Descartes, and so on. They should also be fully cognisant of the African tradition of the so-called *ajami* literature, that is, literature using Arabic script in a non-Arabic language.

Other lessons are to be drawn from the works of the most prominent representative of the elite of scholars from Timbuktu, Ahmad Baba. His importance has been highlighted in many chapters. I would like in turn to insist on the position taken by this great African philosopher in the face of racism, when he replied unambiguously to interlocutors who implied that enslavement of black people was the natural consequence of some cosmic curse against the descendants of Ham, son of Noah: 'There is no difference between one race and another,' he wrote in his *Mi'raj al-su'ud*,¹⁰ dismissing unequivocally any idea of a 'natural' character of slavery that could lead to disparagingly calling black people 'abid (slaves), as is even today sometimes the case.

I also consider that Ahmad Baba's work titled *Tuhfat al-fudala*¹¹ encapsulates the meaning of Timbuktu's and of West Africa's written tradition in general. At the centre of its topic is Baba's citation of a prophetic saying (*hadith*) that summarises perfectly the argument made in the book: 'One hour of a scholar laying on his bed but meditating on his knowledge is more valuable than the worship of a devout person during seventy years.'¹² Ahmad Baba insists on the value of knowledge with the precision that knowledge is authentic and complete only when it is a way of life, when beyond the mastery of a science there is scrupulous attention to what a good life means, when the accomplished *faqih* (jurist) is also the fully realised 'arif (sage).

The reason I mention the importance of *Tuhfat al-fudala* is that it conveys a double lesson for us today. The first lesson about the importance of knowledge is that the manuscripts must of course be preserved and catalogued, but turning them into sheer museum objects is not the ultimate goal. The meditation on African sciences and knowledge requires that the manuscripts, in Timbuktu and elsewhere, be published and

made accessible to today's scholarship. The second lesson is another prophetic saying, also quoted by Baba in *Tuhfat al-fudala*: 'The ink of the scholar is more precious than the blood of the martyr.'¹³ Although we live in a time when ignorance speaks in the loud voice of bombs and assassins pretend that they are martyrs, we are reminded by one of the greatest African philosophers of the past that the patience of education has incomparably more value than any other form of combat.

NOTES

- 1 Diop (1960: 133).
- 2 In Publications de la Fondation Temimi (1997). See also Diagne (2000).
- 3 Publications de la Fondation Temimi (1997: 117).
- 4 Publications de la Fondation Temimi (1997: 116).
- 5 Ka'ti (1913: 272).
- 6 Ka'ti (1913: 272).
- 7 Appiah (1992: 144).
- 8 Hunwick & O'Fahey (1995: 222).
- 9 Hunwick & O'Fahey (1995: 222).
- 10 Hunwick & Harrak (2000: 35).
- 11 Sami & Zniber (1992).
- 12 Sami & Zniber (1992: 29).
- 13 Sami & Zniber (1992: 16).

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