

Shaykh Baghayogho al-Wangari and the Wangari Library in Timbuktu

*Mukhtar bin Yahya al-Wangari*¹

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful
The most excellent of Creators brings salutations upon the best of creation.

The city of Timbuktu was built in the latter part of the fifth century *hijri* (AD 1100) by the Tuareg of Maghsharan. They first used it as a station to move their livestock to during the winter season when they came from Arawan, a city of knowledge, pious people, saints and judges. They also stored grain and other goods there, and dug a number of wells. Timbuktu's unique location in the region attracted merchants who met and sometimes rested there. In time the city transformed into a market for Saharan traders and caravans (from Egypt and the oases of Aujalah, Ghadamas, Fazan, Tuwat, Tiflalit, Fez, Sus and Dar'a) en route to the market in Walata.

Towards the end of the eleventh century, Timbuktu replaced Walata as the destination of the trade routes. Timbuktu became an important centre for meeting and trading in West Africa. Trade in salt, wheat, slaughtered camels and gold nuggets occurred between the cities of the Bilad al-Sudan and the cities of the northern Sahara. In this way Timbuktu became a dominant centre for traders passing between Jenne and Walata. The city also became famous for its river fishing and port facilities. The importance of the Niger River for Timbuktu is illustrated in the fact that the city is located near to the river, which dominates a large part of West Africa. This gave Timbuktu, the largest commercial centre, a huge advantage over the neighbouring markets – the river was an indispensable medium for transporting merchandise and people to places such as Gao and Mopti. Trade in these neighbouring markets started to decline around the end of the fourteenth century, in part due to Timbuktu's suitable geographical location, but also because the town became the centre of learning and so attracted numerous scholars, many of whom came from patrician families.

Opposite: Inside the al-Wangari library in Timbuktu's Bajinde district, South Africa's deputy minister of arts and culture is shown the collection of manuscripts on display, and meets several of the *imams* and scholars of the city.

Thus it was not strange that a flourishing trade brought with it economic and cultural prosperity, as well as 'civilisation'. One of Timbuktu's architectural relics from the earliest days of the city's existence is the minaret of the Sankore Mosque, located in the northern area of the city. According to the historian 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di (d. post 1656) in his *Tarikh al-Sudan*, it was built by the generosity of a wealthy woman of the Aghlal tribe.² Sankore's intellectual and cultural character developed from very early on through the co-development of the architectural movement with the construction of mosques and schools, on the one hand, and the arrival of groups of scholars, professors and students, on the other. This conferred upon the city the cloak of fame, honour and historical immortality until it was regarded by the Muslims of the region as on a par with other great Islamic centres of learning and knowledge, such as Ishbiliyah (Seville) and Granada. This reality is attested to by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'di:

Thus did they choose the location of this virtuous, pure, undefiled and proud city, blessed with divine favour, a healthy climate, and [commercial] activity which is my birth place and my heart's desire. It is a city unsullied by the worship of idols, where none has prostrated save to God the Compassionate. A refuge of scholarly and righteous folk, a haunt of saints and ascetics, and a meeting place of caravans and boats.³

Historians further extol the status of the city when they describe its inhabitants as people who revered knowledge and who invited scholars and the most famous jurists from as far afield as Egypt, Morocco, Iraq and Spain to teach at Timbuktu's Sankore University.⁴ Al-Hasan al-Wazzan, better known as Leo Africanus, described Timbuktu as a city swarming with numerous judges, men of letters and propagators. They were spread all over the city with their manuscript libraries as a result of the flourishing of the sciences (knowledge) that were taught at the Sankore University and the numerous other circles of knowledge.⁵ Trade in books, more than in any other commercial goods, became the most lucrative source for profits. The public libraries that were owned by the scholars were open to all who wanted to borrow or read books.

Education in Timbuktu

The curricula in Timbuktu's centres of learning, specifically at Sankore, included all the Islamic disciplines known and taught in the other universities in the Islamic world at that time, such as al-Azhar University in Cairo, al-Qarawiyyin in Fez and al-Qayrawan in Tunis. These disciplines included theology, Qur'anic exegesis, prophetic traditions, substantive law and the rational sciences such as syntax, morphology, rhetoric, logic, history, geography and other sciences which at that time constituted the fundamental pillars of the Islamic sciences.

The Sankore Mosque was also famous for the teaching of the Maliki legal school of thought, taught by scholars thoroughly proficient in their subject, whether they were natives of Timbuktu or from other places. This was indicative of the cultural and educa-



The Sankore Mosque, famous centre of learning in Timbuktu since the earliest days of the city's existence.

tional links between Timbuktu and the most famous Islamic centres of knowledge on the African continent: the cities of Qistat and Qayrawan in Tunisia and Fez in Morocco.

The eminent scholar al-Qadi Muhammad al-Kabari said:

I was the contemporary of righteous folk of Sankore, who were equaled in their righteousness only by the Companions of the Messenger of God – may God bless him and grant him peace and be pleased with all of them.⁶

Among them were the jurist al-Hajj, grandfather of Qadi 'Abd al-Rahman b. Abi Bakr b. al-Hajj; the jurist 'Abu Abd Allah Anda Ag-Muhammad b. Muhammad b. 'Uthman b. Muhammad b. Nuh al-Sanhaji; the jurist al-Mukhtar b. Muhammad b. al-Faqih (meaning the jurist) al-Mukhtar al-Nahwi; Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah b. al-Faqih Ahmad Buryu; the three grandsons of Anda Ag-Muhammad in the female line: the jurist Abd Allah, the jurist al-Hajj Ahmad, and the jurist Mahmud; sons of the jurist 'Umar b. Muhammad Aqit; al-Sharif Sidi Yahya; Qadi 'Umar b. al-Faqih Mahmud; Abu 'l-Abbas Ahmad b. al-Faqih Muhammad b. Said; Abu Bakr b. Ahmad Ber; the jurist Muhammad Baghayogho al-Wangari and his brother the jurist Ahmad Baghayogho and many others.⁷

Muhammad Baghayogho al-Wangari

Muhammad b. Mahmud b. Abi Bakr al-Wangari at-Timbukti al-Jinnawi, known as Baghayogho (b.1523–24, d.1594), was a distinguished shaykh and jurist. Al-Sa'di describes him thus in the *Tarikh al-Sudan*:

He was a source of blessing, a jurist, an accomplished scholar, a pious and ascetic man of God, who was among the finest of God's righteous servants and practising

scholars. He was a man given by nature to goodness and benign intent, guileless, and naturally disposed to goodness, believing in people to such an extent that all men were virtually equal in his sight, so well did he think of them and absolve them of wrongdoing. Moreover, he was constantly attending to people's needs...becoming distressed at their misfortunes, mediating their disputes, and giving counsel. Add to this his love of learning and his devotion to teaching, in which pursuit he spent his days...his lending of his most rare and precious books in all fields without asking for them back again...Sometimes a student would come to his door requesting a book, and he would give it to him without even knowing who the student was...doing this for the sake of God.⁸

Ahmad Baba al-Sudani (d.1627) said: 'One day I came to him asking for books on grammar, and he hunted through his library bringing me everything he could find on the subject.'⁹ This anecdote sheds light on Baghayogho al-Wangari's library in Timbuktu and the distribution of his manuscripts across the city. Ahmad Baba himself had a library whose books were confiscated by the Moroccan army after their occupation of Timbuktu in 1591: 'I had the smallest library of any of my kin, and they [the soldiers of the invading Moroccan army] seized 1 600 volumes.'¹⁰ Ahmad Baba further says about his shaykh, Muhammad Baghayogho al-Wangari:

He had enormous patience in teaching throughout the entire day, and was able to get his matter across to even the dull-witted, never feeling bored or tired until those attending his class would grow fed up without it bothering him. I once heard one of our colleagues say: 'I think this jurist drank Zamzam water [water from the Zamzam well in Mecca] so that he would not get fed up during teaching.'¹¹

Ahmad Baba also remarked on the shaykh's perseverance and adherence to worship, his good intentions and aversion to bad characteristics, and his positive approach to all people, even oppressors. He was chaste and humble and carried the flag of righteousness with tranquillity, respect and good character. Everyone loved and praised him and it was agreed that he guided people's tongues. He was very spirited in his teaching and was never harsh to beginners or to slow learners.

He devoted his entire life to teaching, even while faithfully attending to the needs of the general public and to judicial matters. Once the sultan invited him to accept appointment as *qadi* of Gao, the seat of the Songhay Empire, but the shaykh refused the offer, holding himself aloof from it. He devoted himself to teaching, particularly after the death of Qadi Sidi Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Said (there is no apparent reason for this). Ahmad Baba al-Sudani says:

When I first met him he was teaching various classes at the beginning of his day from the hour of the early morning worship until mid-morning. Then he would return to his house and perform the mid-morning prayer (*salah al-duha*), remaining a while and after that sometimes going to the *qadi* (the judge), to plead for people or to effect a reconciliation. During the noon hour, he would teach in his house and lead the

people in the noon prayer and then teach again until the time of the afternoon prayers. After this, he would go out to teach in some other place until dusk or thereabouts. He then performed the *maghrib* prayers (a few minutes after sunset), then continued his teaching in the great mosque until the *isha* prayer (evening prayers) and then finally returned home. I heard that he always used to spend the last part of the night engaged in prayer and devotions.¹²

Baghayogho al-Wangari's education

The shaykh studied Arabic and Islamic law under his father, al-Qadi Mahmud, and his maternal uncle, al-Faqih Ahmad. He then travelled to Timbuktu with his brother, the jurist al-Faqih Salih Ahmad. There they studied Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Said's teaching of the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil. Together they then travelled to perform the pilgrimage with their maternal uncle and met with al-Nasir al-Laqani, al-Tajuri, al-Sharif Yusuf al-Urmayuni, al-Barhamtushi al-Hanafi, Imam Muhammad al-Bakri and other scholars.¹³

On their return from the pilgrimage and on the death of their maternal uncle, they settled in Timbuktu and, under Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Said, studied jurisprudence and *hadith*. With him they also read the *Muwatta*, the *Mudawwana*,¹⁴ the *Mukhtasar* and other works, following his teaching devotedly. Under Ahmad Baba al-Sudani's father they studied source methodology in jurisprudence, rhetoric and logic, and read with him the *Usul*, that is, the jurisprudential work of the Egyptian scholar al-Subki, and the *Talkhis al-miftah*. They also attended the spiritual retreat of Shaykh al-Khunaji whilst remaining committed to their reading, thereby gaining abundant knowledge until Muhammad Baghayogho became the unparalleled shaykh of his age in the various branches of learning.¹⁵ Ahmad Baba al-Sudani says:

I remained with him [Baghayogho al-Wangari] for ten years, and completed with him the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil in my own reading and that of 46 others some eight times. I completed with him the *Muwatta*, reading it for comprehension, as well as the *Tas'hil* of ibn Malik, spending three years on it, in an exhaustive analytical study. I also studied the *Usul* of al-Subki with al-Mahalli's commentary exhaustively three times, the *Alfiya* of al-'Iraqi with the author's commentary, the *Talkhis al-miftah* with the abridged [commentary] of al-Sa'd, which I read twice or more, the *Sughra* of al-Sanusi and the latter's commentary on the *Jaza'iriyya*, and the *Hikam* of ibn 'Ata' Allah with the commentary of Zarruq; the poem of Abu Muqri, and the *Hashimiyya* on astronomy together with its commentary, and the *Muqaddima* of al-Tajuri on the same subject, the *Rajaz* of al-Maghili on logic, the *Khazrajiiyya* on prosody with the commentary of al-Sharif al-Sabti, much of the *Tuhfat al-hukkam* of ibn 'Asim and the commentary on it by his son; all the above were in my own reading. I read exhaustively with him the entire *Far'i* of Ibn al-Hajib, and attended his classes similarly on the *Tawdh* missing only from [the section on] 'deposited goods' to [the section on] 'judgments'; also much of the *Muntaqa* of al-Baji, the *Mudawwana* with the



Al-Imam Baba Mahmud, a descendant of Muhammad Baghayogho al-Wangari and present *imam* of the Sidi Yahya mosque in Timbuktu.

commentary of Abu 'l-Hasan al-Zarwili, and the *Shifa* of Iyad. I read with him about half the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari and listened to it in his reading; similarly the whole of the *Sahih* of Muslim and parts of the *Madkhal* of Ibn al-Hajj and lessons from the *Risala* of Abi Zaid al-Qayrawani, and the *Alfiyya* and other works. I undertook exegesis of the Mighty Qur'an with him to part way through Surah al-'Araf (the eighth chapter of the Qur'an), and I heard in his delivery the entire *Jami al-mi'yar* of al-Wansharishi (d.1508), which is a large work, as well as other works of his. We discussed the finer points of these works at length and I went over with him the most important matters in them. In sum, he is my teacher; from no one else did I derive so much benefit...[as] I did from him and his books. May God shower him with mercy and recompense him with paradise. He granted me a licence in his own hand [writing] for everything for which he had a licence and for those works for which he gave his own [in order to teach and deliver texts, etc]. I drew his attention to one of my writings, and he was pleased with it, and wrote praise of it in his own hand; indeed he wrote down portions of my scholarly research, and I heard him quoting some of it in his classes, for he was fair-minded and humble, and ready to accept truth from wherever it came. He was with us [his students, fellow scholars and friends] on the day of the tribulation [Moroccan conquest of Timbuktu in 1591], and that was the last time I saw him. I heard later that he had died on Friday 19 Shawal 1002 (8 July 1594). He wrote some comments and glosses in which he pointed out the errors made by commentators on [the *Mukhtasar* of] Khalil and others, and he went through the large commentary of al-Tata'i [on the *Mukhtasar*], pointing out most valuably the errors of that author, as well as those al-Tata'i transmitted from others. I [Ahmad Baba] gathered these together in a small [independent] work – May God shower him with mercy.¹⁶

The library of Baghayogho al-Wangari

The library was established some time between Shaykh Muhammad Baghayogho's arrival and settling in Timbuktu and his death in 1594. The first person who undertook to preserve and protect the library was his third son, Imam Ibrahim al-Wangari, in the mid-seventeenth century. After his death it was in the care of Ahmad al-Wangari, then al-Imam Sidi Mahmud, then Alfa Aba Bakr al-Wangari, then his son Muhammad al-Mustapha al-Wangari, then al-Imam Muhammad al-Wangari, called Baniyu, and then his son al-Imam Baba Alfa 'Umar al-Wangari.

One of the great-grandchildren of the founder of the library, namely al-Imam Mahmud al-Wangari (Hasi), deserves all praise for collating and preserving the manuscripts after the library was dissolved and its manuscripts scattered in various places amongst family members in Jenne, Gundam and Timbuktu. He collected whatever manuscripts he could get from family members and kept them in one place. However, despite these efforts of al-Imam Mahmud al-Wangari, many of the manuscripts remained scattered all over until al-Sayyid Sidi Mukhtar Katani b. Sidi Yahya al-Wangari¹⁷ started an earnest search for all the contents of the library of Shaykh Muhammad Baghayogho.

I depended on oral testimony and information found in documents (manuscripts, authorisations, letters, correspondence, etc.). I then requested a meeting with the entire family to discuss the construction and arrangement of the library. All of them agreed and thanked me for the initiative and the excellent idea which would restore to the family its status and honour in the Timbuktu community, which in turn would be nourished by the knowledge and culture offered by the library.

Al-Imam Baba Mahmud, the *imam* of the Sidi Yahya Mosque, who is responsible for family heritage and customs, instructed me to put all our manuscripts in one of our homes. I then organised the library, naming it the Wangari Manuscript Library. It is a private library and its doors are open to all who desire to do research and seek knowledge. The first to officially recognise the library was the municipal mayor of Timbuktu, who supported us and granted us permission to open on 26 September 2003.¹⁸

We received a firm commitment from all those members of the family who possessed manuscripts to hand them over until we had collected a large number of the scattered manuscripts, especially the ones in Timbuktu and Gundam. Over 1 500 manuscripts were collected at the time, although it is possible that we have more than that number. We are therefore revising the count as well as continuing the search for other manuscripts. All the manuscripts that we have thus far collected make up the contents of the Wangari Library. The library contains many works written by Moroccan and Sudanese scholars.¹⁹ The oldest manuscript in the library, comprising parts of the Qur'an in the *riqqa*²⁰ script that belonged to Muhammad Baghayogho al-Wangari, was copied in 1107 *hijri*. The library also contains some important historical documents.

The current condition of the manuscripts is not good given the difficult conditions and meagre resources of this town. The manuscripts are in dire need of restoration and binding. Also, the special room in which they are stored is small and unsuitable. We therefore hope for extended assistance in order to put in place the best conditions for the preservation of the manuscripts. We have suggested to potential donors and officials that the house of Shaykh Muhammad Baghayogho al-Wangari be repaired and renovated and that it be registered on the list of national and international heritage sites, as the manuscript heritage played an important role in the dissemination of the Arabic language and Islamic culture throughout all the regions of the western Bilad al-Sudan.

The most important manuscript libraries – with all of which the Wangari Library has excellent relationships – in Timbuktu and surrounding areas are: the Ahmed Baba Institute, the Mamma Haidara Library, the Nadi Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti Library, the Fondo Ka'ti Library, the Arawan Library, the Boudjbeha Library, the al-Shaykh al-Tijan Library, the al-Shaykh Sidi Alin Library, the Muhammad Mahmud b.



The entrance to the Wangari Manuscript Library in Timbuktu.

al-Shaykh al-Arwani Library, the Imam al-Suyuti Library, the Qadi Ahmad Baba Abi 'l-Abbas Library, the Muhammad al-Tahir Sharaf Library, the Alfa Baba Library, the Abul Araf al-Takni al-Timbukti Library, the Qadi wa 'l-Imam al-Aqib Library, the Alfa Salim al-Lamtuni Library, the Muhammad Yaish al-Kaladi Library, the Ababa al-Bakri Library (in Gundam), the Mawlay Ali al-Shaykh Haidara Library, the Sidi al-Makki Library, the Sharaf Alfa Ibrahim Library, the Ahmad Badiji Library, the Shaykh Almin Iji Library, the Mawlay Ahmad Baber Library, the Abd al-Qadir b. Abd al-Hamid Library (in Kulanji, Senegal), the al-Kitani Library (in Fez, Morocco), the San Sharfi Library, the Ahmad Baniyu al-Wangari Library and the Baba Alfa Umar al-Wangari Library.

The legacy of the manuscripts

Throughout the past 14 centuries, Arabs and Muslims have made a huge contribution to the development of the sciences, culture and knowledge, resulting in the modern civilisation that the world is benefiting from today. They were able to spread their culture to many nations greater than them in number and stronger in resources. They manufactured the best paper, the best quality ink, and the choicest leather for manuscripts. Their books were widely available at a time when the use of paper was still underdeveloped in Europe.

Comparatively few Arabic manuscripts remain, as many were burned in the courtyards of Cordova during the time of the tragedy of Spain, or destroyed in the Tigris River during the Mongolian wars,²¹ or buried in graves and walls during communist rule in central Asian Muslim countries during the twentieth century. Whatever manuscripts remain fall into one of two categories: those that found their way to Europe; and those that are still in Arab countries, many of the latter having been lost or damaged. The time has come for us to salvage what can be salvaged. We should train a capable group of people to protect and safeguard these Arabic-Islamic manuscripts, thereby assuring their preservation and creating the opportunity for researchers to benefit from them.

After conducting a study in conjunction with the Ahmed Baba Institute in 1967, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation indicated that there are over one million manuscripts in Mali. Our view as curators of the private libraries is that between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries there were more than a million manuscripts scattered between the old Sankore Mosque, other mosques, private Islamic schools and family homes. We believe that many manuscripts were taken to Morocco following the Moroccan invasion and occupation of Timbuktu in 1591.

The authors and copiers of the manuscripts – some of whom were women – were Arabs from Morocco, the East, Spain and western Arawan. Many were Africans, specifically from Timbuktu, Walata and Jenne. Some of these authors wrote in African languages like Tamasheq, Hausa, Songhay, Wolof, Fulfulde and Bambara, but all were in Arabic script. There are entries in the margins of some of the manuscripts to indicate who the

original owners were, who bought the manuscript and for what price, which fluctuated between money and gold.

The manuscripts deal with the sciences of the Qur'an; Qur'anic exegesis; *hadith*, including its sciences; Islamic law; jurisprudence; *sira*; *tawhid*; morphology, linguistics, grammar, prosody, rhetoric, logic and expression; philosophy; travel; medicine and physiology; chemistry; engineering; astrology; design; inheritance; herbology; Arabic poems, documents and correspondence; slave trading; occult sciences; *fatwas*; and the discussions of the scholars. These scholars from Timbuktu and other areas exchanged knowledge and Islamic research. There were great intellectual riches in this exchange of opinions and ideas, which echoed through to the regions of the Niger River and the shores of the Arabs.

NOTES

- 1 Translated from Arabic by Nurghan Singh and Mohamed Shaid Mathee.
- 2 The author used a manuscript copy of the *Tarikh al-Sudan* as his reference but since the translators have used John Hunwick's translation of the work, from here on we will cite the translation as reference. See Hunwick (1999: lix).
- 3 Hunwick (1999: 29).
- 4 Translator's note: Hunwick cautions against applying the term 'university' to Sankore or Timbuktu as it amounts to facile comparisons. He says: 'What was taking place in Timbuktu should be viewed within the cultural context of Islamic civilization, rather than being associated conceptually with a European institution' (1999: lviii).
- 5 Translator's note: In addition to the Sankore Mosque there were other, albeit smaller, centres of learning.
- 6 *Tarikh al-Sudan*, manuscript copy.
- 7 Hunwick (1999: 38–49).
- 8 Hunwick (1999: 62–63).
- 9 Hunwick (1999: 63).
- 10 Hunwick (1999: 315).
- 11 Hunwick (1999: 63).
- 12 Hunwick (1999: 64).
- 13 Hunwick (1999: 65).
- 14 Translator's note: these two works are the earliest works of Maliki jurisprudence.
- 15 Hunwick (1999: 65).
- 16 Hunwick (1999: 65–68).
- 17 The author of this chapter, henceforth referred to in the first person singular (I).
- 18 Under the licence number 12/CUT/2003, dated 26 September 2003.
- 19 Translator's note: not Sudan the country, but Sudan in Arabic meaning 'black Africa'.
- 20 Translator's note: this is one of the many calligraphic fonts or scripts in which Arabic, specifically the Qur'an, was written.
- 21 Translator's note: the first incident refers to just after 1492 when Christians in Spain regained control over the whole of the Iberian Peninsula and began the Inquisition against Muslims and Jews. Thus there was a campaign to destroy all traces of Islam – through conversion to Christianity, executions or removal of people from the Peninsula, destruction of books and manuscripts, taking over of Islamic architecture such as mosques and turning them into churches, etc. The second incident refers to around 1250 when the Mongol forces swept across the world, sacking and destroying Baghdad in 1258. It is reported that their pillage lasted for around 40 days, during which time close to a million people were killed and many books were dumped in the Tigris River.

REFERENCE

Hunwick J (1999) *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: al-Sadi's Tarikh al-Sudan down to 1613 and other contemporary documents*. Leiden: Brill

