

SCHOLARS OF PEACE – THE ISLAMIC TRADITION AND HISTORICAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN TIMBUKTU

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Over the past six hundred to seven hundred years an important global legacy has developed -- the literate culture of Islam – illustrated through the extraordinary richness of historical Arabic manuscripts that still survive, often precariously, in the Niger valley and its desert hinterland. Timbuktu, located on the northern most bend of the River Niger in Mali, was a celebrated center of Islamic learning from the fourteenth century onwards. Not only were books brought into the city, but local scholars wrote their own works and began binding them through a sophisticated local book production industry which appears to have begun in Timbuktu as early as the fifteenth century.

There are an estimated sixty to eighty private collections of historical manuscripts in the city of Timbuktu alone. Countless other collections are dispersed throughout the Sahara desert surrounding Timbuktu. The vast majority of the collections are held in the hands of the descendants of the original scholars. These people live in dire poverty for the most part and have endured great sacrifice to retain the legacy of their ancestors. The collections are in extreme danger. Each year more documents become brittle and unreadable. This legacy – an African legacy, an Islamic legacy, and a human cultural legacy – is in danger of being lost if constructive action is not undertaken to preserve it.

The historic city of Timbuktu, now the administrative center of Mali's Sixth Region, lies at a crucial point where the Sahara desert meets the river Niger. Its geographical setting made it a natural meeting point for settled African populations and nomadic Berber and Arab peoples. Founded around the year 1100 CE, it rapidly became a focal point for caravan commerce originating in North Africa or the Saharan oases. The city's rapidly growing prosperity, soon attracted scholars to it from many quarters--from Mediterranean Africa, the Saharan oases and West African towns such as Djenne and Walata.

By the mid-fifteenth century Timbuktu was as much a city of learning as it was a city of commerce. The scholars who settled there brought their libraries with them, and avidly purchased hand scripted books imported from North Africa and Egypt. Leo Africanus; the Mediaeval African explorer remarked on the "numerous judges, scholars and priests [i.e. imams], all well paid by the king, who shows great respect to men of learning", and added "Many manuscript books coming from Barbary are sold. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods."

Books were not only imported to Timbuktu, they were also produced there, and it was the local production industry that enabled Timbuktu scholars to build up their own libraries. Under the Songhay empire (1468-1591) special royal grants were given to Muslim scholars and the King Askia Daoud (1548-1583) established public libraries throughout the realm.

The Hadith of Abi al Darda reports that the Prophet of Allah said: "Shall I inform you of merit greater than fasting, charity, and prayer? It is in the conciliation of people." The historical Islamic manuscripts of Timbuktu show numerous examples of the role African scholars and leaders played throughout West Africa toward managing community and government conflict, in perpetuating a culture of peace, in the promotion of good by the banishment of evil, and in the application of methodologies and processes of conciliation between people. In the current context of global conflict, we would do well to learn from their interactions.

The Mosques of Timbuktu were centers of mediation and arbitration between warring regional factions. Imams, judges and scholars opened the Mosques and declared them sanctuaries for any factions willing to seek resolution to the conflicts separating them. The scholars didn't limit their interventions there, however. They often opened their homes to parties in conflict – women in conflict with their husbands, sons in conflict with their fathers sought refuge and found mediation in their midst. The scholars traveled great distances in the desert to bring peace between people of the region. They considered themselves Ambassadors of Peace and champions of the Koranic tradition calling for peaceful resolution to conflict and dispute. On numerous instances, the scholars personally reimbursed debts or fulfilled promises in order to lessen tensions between factions and to ensure that an atmosphere of mediation and peace reigned. The scholars championed issues of tolerance in principle and in practice. Mahmoud Ben Umar (1463-1548), Grand Cadi (Islamic leader) of Timbuktu and one of the greatest jurists in the history of Timbuktu, vehemently disapproved the tyrannical arrest of Jewish merchants in the city of Gao further south in the desert kingdom. His objections and subsequent well articulated arguments obliged the King, Askia Mohamed, to rescind his order and to free the merchants. In situations of extreme conflict, where neither argument nor reason brought resolution, the scholars often went to extreme measures to invoke the faith of the parties in dispute. By literally "throwing" their prayer beads toward the belligerents, the scholars were able to oblige the parties to unify, conciliate, and to bring an end to conflict in respect of the symbolic gesture inspired by the Koran.

The Kitab al-Tarâ if wa l- talâ'id of Sheikh Sidi Mohamed Ben Sheikh Sidi Al-Kunti enumerates the extensive lengths his father went when he sought and identified the means to resolve a blood conflict between the Arma of Timbuktu and the nomadic Touareg of the desert surrounding the city. He was able to convince the Touareg to accept peaceful terms and compensation even though

their culture precludes the accepting of “blood money”, as such. This monumental agreement brought the end to a siege and subsequent famine of the city so intense that the population had resorted to eating diseased animals and vermin. The manuscript further shows how the Sheikh was subsequently called to rule on conflicts resulting from disputes in the succession of the Touareg Kel Tadmekket even though he was of a completely different ethnic group. The man whom many consider the Sheikh of peace was instrumental in negotiating an end to acts of highway robbery and terror perpetuated by the Berabich Oulad Souleyman and the Idanan (two desert tribes) on the city of Timbuktu and on travelers and merchants in the region.

Ahmad Al Bakkaye is one of the most charismatic figures of Timbuktu political and spiritual history. He was a pious Muslim, who according to the manuscript entitled *Zakhîrat al – Sarmad* fought “as well with plume as with sword”. In a letter addressed to Amadou Amadou, Fulani ruler of the great city of Hamdallaye who sent special forces and spies to aid in the conquest of Timbuktu, he states: “I will not be kept quiet about the shameful acts of the depraved. I will revile them, I will criticize them, their acts, their companions, and those that accompany them in their ideology!”.

Al hadj Oumar Tall, *ibn Sa' id al-Fûtî* (1794/97-1864), nicknamed “The Armed Prophet” for his many conquests in the name of spreading the faith of Islam throughout much of West Africa, is one of the great scholar-leaders of the Timbuktu region. He relates the following in the *Safu-l-Haki – The Sword of the Truth*: “We (royal we) left our country to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. We decided to take the road that passes through Fez because it was the shortest. Alas, God had other plans and we were forced to take the road through the Soudan even though we would have wished otherwise as the majority of the inhabitants along this road are unbelievers.

“Nevertheless, we followed the perilous route with the greatest prudence; our welcome was warm until we arrived in the country of the Haoussa. We were given an opportunity to meet their King, several scholars, and other important persons. We were given to understand that a very serious conflict existed between them and the Emir of Bornou – it gave us great pain and affliction. We were however unable to speak of it with the King of the Haoussa even though he had shown us great kindness and a warm welcome. Thusly, we were unable to undertake the steps necessary to conciliate these peoples, in spite of our duty and our desire to do so. Indeed, if we had engaged a dialogue between these two peoples, we could have been of assistance; the King is truly an affable man of God and he has shown us great friendship.

“The only reason we did not undertake to speak to the King was that such an intervention would divert us from our objective in our pilgrimage to the holy house of God. In this case, we had a good excuse. Thus, we left for Mecca bemoaning their fate and hoping to find them reconciled on our return.

“On our return from the pilgrimage, and upon arriving at Fezan, we learned that the conflict persisted still. We decided thus to intervene, even though we were not the best suited for this task as many eminent persons were present for this purpose. We thought not to succeed, but we intervened in any case and our intervention bore fruit. We undertook these steps in the name of God who said in the holy Koran: “It is created in you what you know not.” It was the word of God that pushed us to proceed, as God said: “There is no greater good in their conversation, if one of them orders charity, an obvious good, or the reconciliation between two peoples. And to whomever seeks the approval of God, to him shall be given great reward’.”

Late in his life, after reconciling many conflicts in his neighbor’s realms, as well as provoking numerous conflicts in the conquest of his own realm, Al hadj Oumar Tall wrote the following: “Tragedy is due to divergence and because of a lack of tolerance. In the tradition of the Prophet, it is written that those who keep rancor in their hearts will not benefit from divine mercy. Tread carefully those of you who resuscitate the tradition of Kabyla. It is written by the Guide of mankind that he who associates himself with God and kills voluntarily will not be pardoned.

“Glory be to he who creates greatness from difference and makes peace and reconciliation. Purity, for those who repent, and find refuge in peace and in avoiding ruin. God, the good Guide, makes it a duty for men to support healthy mutual relations. The purity of relations and social cohesion are guarantors of peace. Who would dare to create havoc in that of his own, to thus mutilate himself? Not even the drunkard. You will never see a wise man purposely harm himself or harbor hostility.

“Conciliation and concord are immense sources of happiness and those who ensure their institution shall be showered in virtue. Such virtue will safeguard you from the hatred of men and the temptations of the devil’.”

The work of these, and many other historical African scholars and leaders of the Timbuktu region toward managing community and government conflict, in perpetuating a culture of peace, in the promotion of good by the banishment of evil, and in the application of methodologies and processes of conciliation between people is currently being researched by a Special Conflict Resolution Research Group in Mali under the support of the American Government Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation. A journal of articles on issues of historical conflict resolution researched out of the corpus of historical Islamic manuscripts of the Timbuktu region will be published by the Special Conflict Resolution Research Group under this support in 2002.

Demonstrations of interest and support for the work of the Special Conflict Resolution Research Group in Mali and the very important conservation work associated with the

manuscripts, can be addressed to Dr. Stephanie Diakité or Mr. Mamadou Diallo at CEDREF@cefib.com.

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