

CEDRAB: THE CENTRE DE DOCUMENTATION ET DE
RECHERCHES AHMAD BABA AT TIMBUKTU

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In November-December 1967 the Unesco organised a 'meeting of experts' on the sources of African history which was held in Timbuktu to which the writer of this note was invited.¹ The principal recommendation of this meeting was that a centre of documentation and research—to be called the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmad Baba—should be established at Timbuktu to collect and preserve the Arabic-Islamic cultural heritage of the Western Sudanic region and, in particular, the heritage of Timbuktu and its region. At the time this seemed like little more than a pious hope, but, strange to relate, within ten years of that date a centre had indeed been founded at Timbuktu and the present writer found himself invited by Unesco to visit the embryonic centre and propose to Unesco a ten-year plan for its development. When, in July-August 1992 I paid a visit to the CEDRAB in pursuit of research for my ongoing translation of al-Sa[°]dī's *Ta[°]rīkh al-Sūdān* I was yet more surprised—and pleasantly so—to discover that many of my 1976 recommendations had been acted upon.

As of the present time, therefore, there exists at Timbuktu a documentation centre where are stored close to 6,000 items in Arabic, ranging from local chronicles and large collections of *fatwas* to single page documents, a small but carefully selected library of printed books in both Arabic and French, a bindery and repair section and a photographic section where microfilms can be made and processed. Additionally, there is a large conference centre with some 'chambres de passage' for visiting

1 See 'Report of the UNESCO Meeting of Experts on the utilisation of written sources for the history of Africa held at Timbuktu, 30 November-7 December 1967' *Research Bulletin* (Centre of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan), 4, 1968, 52-69.

researchers attached, a teaching centre (which can also function as a location for smaller meetings) and a three-bedroom bungalow (not as yet completely fitted out) where longer-term or larger groups of visitors can stay. The development of this centre has been due to a number of factors. First and foremost, is the interest of the Malians in having such a centre and the fact that successive Malian governments have been prepared to fund its day-to-day operations—albeit at a level which only barely ensures its survival. Secondly, is the investment that Unesco initially made in equipping the Centre and supporting some of its activities—an interest that has been supplemented by ALECSO, the ‘Arab Unesco’ and ISESCO, the ‘Islamic Unesco’ in more recent years. Thirdly the financial support which a number of Arab countries—notably Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—have given the project and which has permitted the physical realisation of the Centre in the shape of its present buildings complex. The most important element in the Centre’s development, however, and without which little of the foregoing could have been achieved, is the energetic and single-minded leadership of the Centre’s director since 1977, Dr Mahmoud Zouber. Dr Zouber has a doctorate from the Sorbonne and his dissertation (directed by Charles Pellat), which was on the 16th century Timbuktu scholar Aḥmad Bābā was published in 1977.² He is fluent in Fulfulde (his mother tongue), Songhay, Tamacheq, Classical Arabic (his B.A. is from ‘Ayn Shams University, Cairo), the Ḥassāniyya dialect of Arabic and French, and has a deep knowledge of the history and culture of the Middle Niger region and of the more general culture of Islam. He is very welcoming to visiting researchers (amongst others, two of my own graduate students have recently worked there) and is willing to allow bona fide researchers to photograph items in the collection or, if film is available, to have microfilms made of items in the Centre’s collection by their film unit.

The manuscripts held at the Centre, under the watchful eye of the librarian-archivist Jibril Doucouré, are housed in locked cupboards and are numbered serially according to their acces-

2 *Aḥmad Bābā de Tombouctou (1556-1627): sa vie et son oeuvre*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose 1977.

sion. There has been little real 'preservation' apart from the fabrication of jackets made of card (possibly not acid-free) for individual documents. Generally manuscripts are simply stored 'as is' in their original leather slip-cases or whatever cover they had when purchased. Many are in very fragile condition and urgently require treatment by skilled preservation professionals and only the first 200 items have yet been microfilmed. Many of the 19th century documents on slavery that I photographed, for example, had broken apart into four or more pieces along fold lines; some were so fragile at the edges that even the most careful handling could not prevent pieces from chipping off; others were stained or obscured by discolouration and dirt so that the only way to ensure future legibility for the researcher is to make a hand-written copy *in situ* in addition to photographing.

As noted above, all the items bear an accession number and this is the only form of classification there is. Every item as it was accessioned was entered by hand into a large ledger, indicating the title, author, number of folios and in many cases the name of the original owner. While in the early years of the Centre's existence acquisition expeditions were mounted throughout the Middle Niger region (with the help of a Land Rover purchased in 1983), these did not on the whole produce the kind of results such expenditure might justify. Budget constraints, apart from anything else, soon dictated another policy and more concentrated attention was turned towards the city of Timbuktu itself. Most acquisitions are now made through a permanent member of the Centre's staff, a young *sharīf*, °Abd al-Qādir Haidara who himself inherited a considerable library from his father and who has good connections with many families in the city. He carries out 'prospection campaigns' in the city and establishes lists of items on offer. The Centre then makes selective purchases as and when funds are available. The collection, as of August 1992 contained some 5,800 items entered into the accessions register (now in its third volume) and there were approximately 500 recent acquisitions that had not yet been entered.

The great majority of the items preserved at the Centre Ahmad Baba are of local authorship, though some non-local

items have been acquired if they have some historical or aesthetic interest. Among the latter we may note a beautiful illuminated copy of the *Shifā'* of Qāḍī 'Iyād penned in Morocco (no. 3178) and one volume (in 80ff.) of the *Wafayāt al-a'yān* of Ibn Khallikān in the hand of Aḥmad Bābā, copied by him in Marrakesh in Jumādā I 1008/19 Nov.-18 Dec. 1599 (no. 3866). Almost all the items are in the Arabic language, though the index does record the existence of a letter in Tamacheq and several poems and letters in the Songhay language—the only examples of this language written in the Arabic script so far preserved to the best of my knowledge.

It is difficult to do justice to the richness of the collection in the space of a note such as this, but it may be worthwhile to indicate some of the principal categories of materials and to give illustrative examples of some of them. There are two broad categories of material; (1) items of a 'literary' character—religious treatises, chronicles, poems, all of which (or most of which) may be attributed to an author, and (2) items of a documentary character, including letters, commercial and legal documents. Between these two categories come a large number of items that are in one sense documents and in another sense—in that they are written by scholarly authors—works belonging to a literary tradition. These are the *fatwās*—both individual ones on specific topics and collected volumes—and the *risālas*, often on quite specific topics but addressed to particular individuals or groups.

Let us now consider the first category, i.e. those items which are of a 'literary' nature:-

1. *Religious Treatises*. Prominent among these are works by Kunta scholars, Sīdī al-Mukhtār b. Aḥmad al-Kuntī (d. 1811), his son Sīdī Muḥammad (d. 1826) and his grandson Sīdī Aḥmad al-Bakkā'ī (d. 1865) who was also the effective civil power in Timbuktu in the mid-nineteenth century and the host and protector of Heinrich Barth. Earlier Timbuktu scholarship is represented by a number of works by Aḥmad Bābā (though less than one would have expected), by the *al-Minah al-ḥamīda* of Muḥammad Bābā b. al-Amīn (d 1606) on grammar (no.

1563), the *al-Futūḥ al-Qayyūmiyya* of Aḥmad b. Anda-Ag Muḥammad (d. 1635) (nos. 1927, 1928, 2008) and the commentary by Aḥmad Bābā's grandfather Aḥmad b. °Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt (d. 1583) on al-Maghīlī's poem on logic—the *Amnāḥ al-aḥbāb min mināḥ al-Wahhāb* (no. 1945). There are also numerous works by Mauritanian authors, especially those of Walāta, such as the celebrated *qāḍī* Muḥammad Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār (d. 1912). Finally in this category we may note the existence of copies of a number of works by the early 19th century Sokoto family of scholars and state builders, the Shaykh °Uthmān b. Fūdī (d.1817), his brother °Abd Allāh (d. 1829) and his son Muḥammad Bello (d. 1837). In particular, there are several copies of each of the two volumes of °Abd Allāh's *tafsīr* the *Ḍiyā' al-ta'wīl*. Earlier generations of 'Nigerian' writers are represented by the 17th century Muḥammad al-Wālī b. Sulaymān al-Fullānī of Katsina and his contemporary Muḥammad Masaniḥ also of Katsina and the 18th century Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. Ibrāhīm al-Fallātī of Bornu.

2. *Chronicles*. First—and this was what drew me to Timbuktu for this particular visit—there are two copies of al-Sa°dī's *Ta'riḫ al-Sūdān*,³ Neither is dated, but both appear to be 19th century copies and both are in neat hands with fairly generous vocalisation of most place and personal names. One of them (no. 660 in 163 ff.) was obtained from the papers of Maurice Delafosse which were sold to the Centre by his surviving daughter, and lacks a small portion at the end. The other (no. 681) is complete in 199 ff. There are also two copies of the *Ta'riḫ al-fattāsh*. The one which I briefly examined (no. 3927) follows the text of MS A/B of the published edition but lacks the opening sections down to the account of Mansa Mūsā and has one or more folios missing at the end.

The following is a summary list of the other principal chronicles and biographical dictionaries to be found at the Centre:

279. History of Azawād and the Barabīsh (21 ff.).

3 I am currently engaged in preparing an annotated English translation of this work, based on the published text of Houdas compared with all other known manuscripts

280. History of the people of al-Sūq (ancient Tādmakkat) by °Abd Allāh b. al-Shaykh b. *al-ḥājj* Muḥammad Adda (6 ff.).

492. *Izālat al-rayb wa'l-shakk wa'l-tafrīt fī dhikr al-mu'allifīn min ahl al-Takrūr wa'l-Ṣahrā' wa-ahl Shinqīt*—the incomplete biographical dictionary of the Timbuktu scholar of Moroccan origin Aḥmad Bū 'l-A^crāf compiled in 1941-2 (no. 492, a draft in 80 ff. of which no. 4987 in 110 ff. is a fair copy).⁴

621. History of Azawād and Taoudeni by Abū 'l-Khayr b. °Abd Allāh b. Marzūq al-Arawānī (6 ff.).

684. *Faṭḥ al-Shakūr fī ma'rifat a^cyān 'ulamā'* *al-Takrūr*, a biographical dictionary of the scholars of Timbuktu and the western Sahara down to the end of the 18th century by the Walāta scholar Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭālib al-Bartilī (62 ff.), of which an inferior edition was published in Beirut a few years ago.⁵ The collection also contains a much larger (and presumably fuller) copy at no. 5344 (182 ff.).

669. An expansion and continuation of the preceding item entitled *Minan al-rabb al-ghafūr fī dhikr mā ahmalahu sāhib Faṭḥ al-Shakūr* by Abū Bakr b. Aḥmad al-Walātī (d. 1917) in 173 ff., another item from the Delafosse collection and at present the only known copy of this important work. Mahmoud Zouber told me that he intends to prepare an edition of the work in collaboration with a Moroccan colleague.

769. *Kitāb al-turjumān fī ta'riḫ al-Ṣahrā' wa'l-Sūdān wal-balad Tinbuktu wa-Shinqīt wa-Arawān* by Muḥammad Maḥmūd b. al Shaykh al-Arawānī (56 ff.).

1051. A copy of the well-known *Infāq al-maysūr* of Muḥammad Bello.

1210. An account of the wars of the Tuareg against the French (9 ff.).

1293. A listing of important events in the region beginning from 1100/1688-9 (16 ff.).

2078. Listing of major events in the region from the 9th to

4 See the note on this work by W.A. Brown, 'A new bibliographical aid: the IZALAT AL-RAIB OF Aḥmad Abū 'l-A^crāf al-Tinbukti', *Research Bull.* (Centre of Arabic Docn.), 3, ii, July 1967, 135-6.

5 Ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Kattānī & Muḥammad Ḥajjī, Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-Islāmī, 1401/1981.

the 13th centuries of the *hijra*.

2318. Listing of events in Timbuktu, 1200/1785-6—1215/1800-01 (11 ff.).

2775. A short history of the lands of Takrūr and the towns of the region by Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Aytī/Ītī (31 ff.).

3315. Events and obituaries of Jenne and Timbuktu, c. 1748-1800 (30 ff.).

4284-5. Dates of birth and death of some notable people of Timbuktu (7 ff.).

5343. *Diwān al-mulūk fī salāṭīn al-Sūdān* (56 ff.), an anonymous history of Timbuktu from the Saʿdian conquest of 1591 down to the middle of the 18th century. This is the chronicle version of a work that was published in the form of a biographical dictionary of the Bāshās of Timbuktu with the title *Tadhkirat al-nisyān* by Octave Houdas (with French translation, Paris, 1899-1901). There is also an incomplete copy at no. 2221 (12 ff.).⁶

Turning now to the second category—items of a documentary character and to the *fatwā* material.

1. *Documents relating to property ownership.*

3848. Documents concerning the renting of houses (15ff.).

4468-4563. Inheritance schedules (98 ff.).

4672-4678. Land ownership documents (17 ff.).

5335. Three documents of ownership of land, wells and houses in Walāta.

5407. Documents on sales of houses in Timbuktu.

I did not examine any of these documents personally and the register gives no details on the dates at which such documents were drawn up. However, they are likely to date mainly from the 19th and early 20th centuries if the documents I did examine (which mainly concern slaves) are anything to go by.

2. *Documents of regional and trans-Saharan trade.*

3850. Documents concerned with the transactions of Ghadamsi merchants in Timbuktu (24 ff.).

4283. Documents on the gum arabic trade (6 ff.).

6 There is another MS in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, mss. arabes, 5259, ff. 88r.-152v.

4998-5002. Six letters to and from al-Bashīr al-Talmūdī, a Maghribi merchants resident in Timbuktu.

5305. Letters concerning trade between Timbuktu and Jenne (11 ff.).

5455-5515. Sixty letters to and from Ghadamsi merchants, mainly dating from the 1290s (1873-1883).

5516-5546. Thirty documents relating to prices and rates of exchange as between gold dust, cowries and salt dating from the 1280s and 1290s/c. 1863-1883.

It should be stressed that this is only a rapid sampling of what is in this archive. I was shown lists of several hundred documents the Centre is waiting to purchase from Timbuktu families when cash becomes available. There is little doubt that the possibility exists to reap an enormous harvest of commercial documents from Timbuktu (and, no doubt, Jenne and other centres of trade) over the coming years if funding is forthcoming.

3. *Documents concerning slavery*

Although my search was not exhaustive (but was as thorough as time permitted), I came across just under 200 documents relating to purchase, sale, inheritance and endowment of slaves, as well as documents of manumission and claims to free status. Some were in the form of contracts while others were letters or *fatwās*. I was able to photograph many of these with my own camera, the Centre being out of microfilm at the time (Unesco had sent them a batch of 16 mm instead of 35 mm film!). The following is a representative sampling:

1532. A quarter share of a slave obtained through inheritance by a woman is given away as a charitable donation by her in expiation of her sins.

1534. Sale of a slave woman.

1555. Document of manumission.

1615. Delegation of a *qāḍī* to divide up slaves forming part of an inheritance.

1640. Letter about an offence committed by an *ama'dhūn* slave.

1716. *Fatwā* about a slave woman who apostatised.

2044. Letter from the Bāshā Ba-Haddu b. Bū Bakr (reg. 1761-2) concerning the free status of a family of Bamba.

2089. A legal problem concerning the sale of free persons.

2283. *Fatwā* about a man who acted aggressively (*ta^caddā*) against some one else's slave woman.

2602. *Fatwā* about whether a master should pay his slave's taxes during the colonial period.

2947. The case of a man of unknown ancestry who was enslaved (4 ff.).

3329-3342. Documents on the prices of slaves and other goods at Timbuktu and Jenne.

3555. Document on a claim to free status.

3558. Document dated 1276/1859-60 granting freedom to a slave woman upon her master's death.

5666. A judgement issued concerning a man who beat his slave women to death.

4. Collections of *fatwās*.

There are a dozen or so major collections of *fatwās* at the Centre Ahmad Baba, totalling over 1,800 ff. Some of these are collections of the legal opinions of a particular scholar while others are more diverse collections of opinions of the scholars of the region as a whole. Most of the collections by single individuals are, in fact, by scholars of Mauritanian origin, though the major one is by the late 19th-early 20th century Kunta scholar Bāy b. Sīdī ^cUmar (b. 1865)⁷ which runs to some 488 ff. in nine volumes (nos. 118-126). There are three copies of the major collection of the *fatwās* of the scholars of 'Takrūr'—*al-^cAmal al-mashkūr fī jam^c nawāzil ^culamā³ al-Takrūr* by al-Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-Ghallāwī (nos. 521, 1031 & 5346).⁸ There is also a collection of the opinions Aḥmad Bū 'l-A^crāf (no. 711 in 45 ff.).

7 For a brief account of him from the French colonial perspective, see Lt. Cortier, *D'une rive à l'autre du Sahara*, Paris 1908, 286-9.

8 On this work see the note by W.A. Brown, 'A monument of legal scholarship: the NAWAZIL ^cULAMA³ AL-TAKRŪR of al-Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-Ghallāwī', *Research Bull.* (Centre of Arabic Docn.), 3, ii, July 1967, 137-8.