

Teaching Timbuktu:
Training and Resources* for the [Legacy of Timbuktu](#) Exhibit
Cameron Village Regional Library
January 23-29, 2010

BACKGROUND/ INTRODUCTION

The ancient West African city of Timbuktu was once a vibrant center of scholarly activity, known throughout the Islamic world. Where is Timbuktu? Why was it so important? Where does its story fit in African and World History? The following material is intended as a basic introduction for teachers, students, families, and other North Carolina citizens who will have the opportunity to view manuscripts from this famous center of learning.



*Northern entrance to the
Djinguereber Mosque, University of
Sankore, Timbuktu, Mali*
Aluka Digital Library

Timbuktu, in the contemporary West African nation of Mali, was once a center of scholarship known throughout the Islamic world. For centuries, Europeans (and later Americans!) were largely unaware of this city; in fact the very name “Timbuktu” often conjures up the farthest-flung, most un-knowable place one could imagine!

But in West Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East, Timbuktu was considered an important and well-respected city from the mid-1300s to the 19th century.

Enter to explore the golden legacy of Timbuktu.

[View BBC video of Timbuktu today](#)

Timbuktu and World History:

* Materials developed by the African Studies Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, funded by a Title VI grant from the US Dept. of Education, 2009.

Beginning around 1000 CE, sub-Saharan West Africa was a center in the vast **Muslim commercial networks** of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. This trade, based on substantial **gold mines** in West Africa, led to the development of large, well-organized states, known as “**the Sudanic Kingdoms.**” (Note: We’re talking about WEST Africa here, not the present-day nation of Sudan!).

These **Sudanic Kingdoms** of West Africa, flourished from about the year 1000 to 1600 CE. The first was the ancient kingdom of **Ghana** (circa 1000-1240 CE), then **Mali** (1240-1400), and finally **Songhay** (1400-1600).

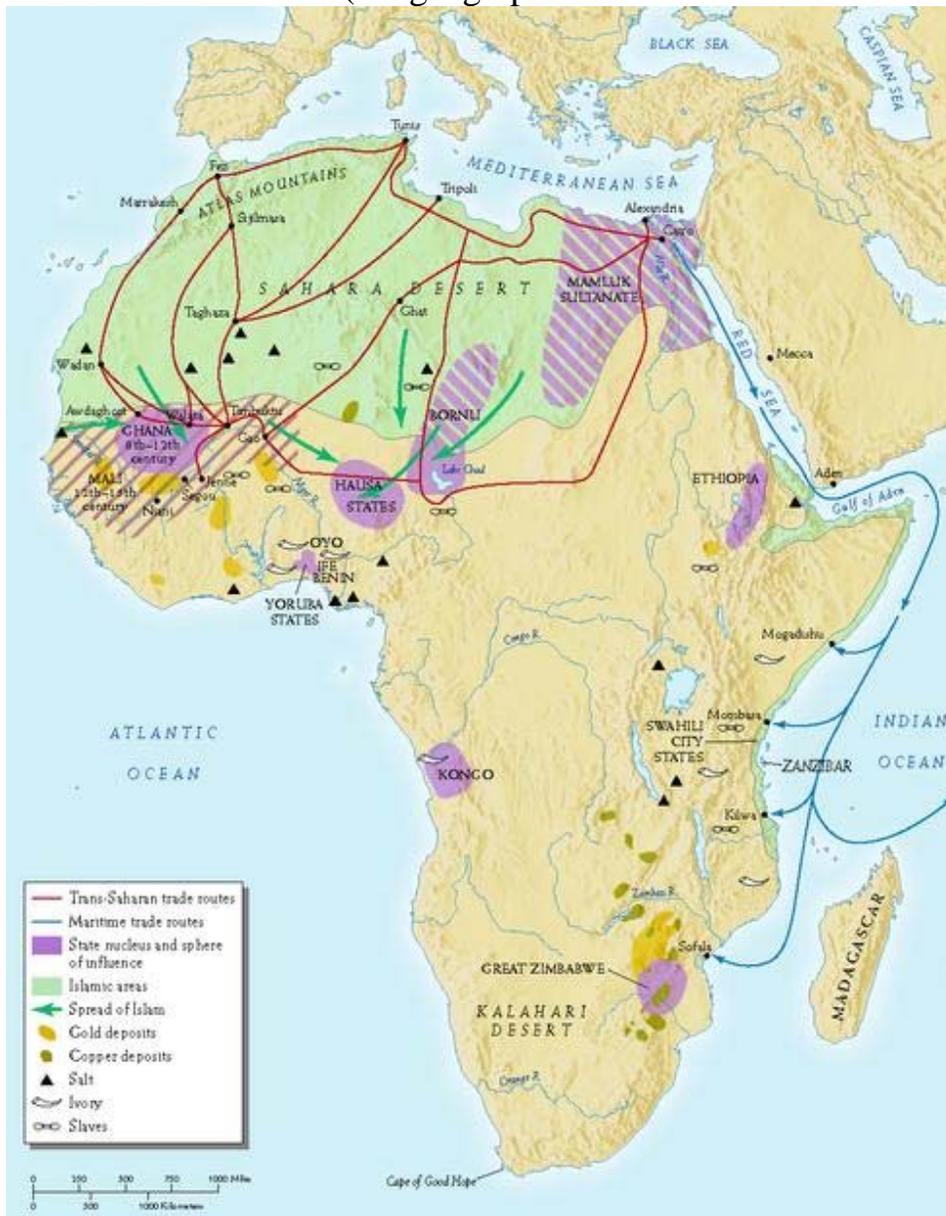
Europeans, though dependent on gold from West Africa for their monetary system, were largely ignorant of these kingdoms. Until the **Age of Exploration**, Europeans were unaware that the African continent existed south of the Sahara. This 14th century map below, created by a cartographer in Spain, indicates the rumors of West African kings that made their way into Europe.



http://www.creixpi.com/mon_mapes/historia/original/1375_detall_atles-catala.jpg

The Sudanic Kingdoms and the Growth of Islam

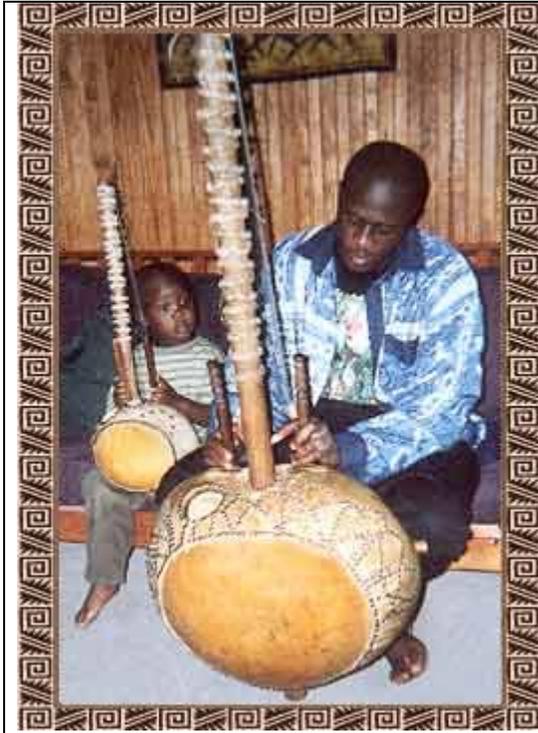
Initially **wealthy merchants in Ghana converted to Islam** in order to facilitate trade with Muslim North Africans. As the Kingdom of Mali gained influence, **Timbuktu** eventually became an important center in this trade. Through the centuries this conversion spread increasingly to the general populations of the **Sahara** and the **Sahel** (the geographic areas that surround the Saharan Desert).



http://www.wvnorton.com/college/history/worlds/images/map1_2.jpg

The kingdom of **Mali** was founded in about 1245 by **Sundiata**, or **Sunjata Keita**, the subject of one of the world's most important epics, whose historical importance

is still celebrated by West African **griots**, (storyteller/musicians) today. Mamadou Diabate, a Malian who now lives in North Carolina, is the son of a long line of *griots*. He plays the *kora*, and shares the glorious past of Mali in his traditional music.



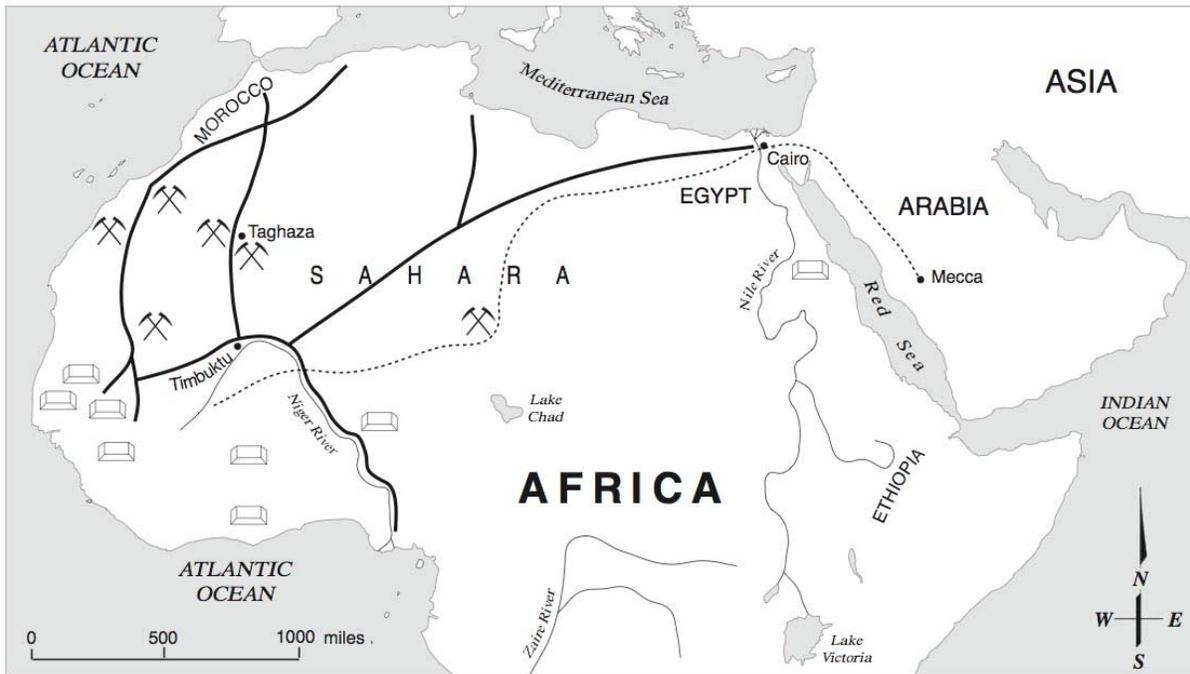
Mamadou Diabate teaching his son to play the *kora*.

You can [listen to Mamadou Diabate play Bin Allah La Ke and Danga](#)

[Read more about Mamadou Diabate](#)

In 1324, a subsequent and even more famous king of **Mali**, **Mansa Musa**, initiated a pilgrimage to Mecca, or *hajj*. Because of the display of his vast wealth, Mansa Musa was able to attract some of the Muslim world's most important scholars, physicians, judges, and architects, who came from the **Arabian Peninsula** to join his kingdom in West Africa. You can trace the *hajj* of Mansa Musa in the map below.

Timbuktu: A Center for Trade



Legend

- Mansa Musa's route to Mecca, 1324
- trade route
-  salt mine
-  gold mine

Florida Geographic Alliance, <http://fga.freac.fsu.edu/>

A famous Muslim traveler from Spain, Leo Africanus, wrote about visiting Timbuktu in the fifteenth century. He called the royal court “magnificent,” and noted that the king “greatly honors learning.” [Read more](#)

The intellectual foundation begun by Mansa Musa in the 1300s is what made **Timbuktu** famous. Timbuktu remained known as a center of learning well into the 1800s. Scholars and governments in Morocco, Algiers, and Egypt, for example, maintained respectful relationships with their counterparts in **Timbuktu**. Eventually changing world economic processes and the progression of the Saharan Desert shifted the status of **Timbuktu**, turning it into a much less vital urban center.

The Legacy of Timbuktu

In the late 20th century, Europeans and Americans “**rediscovered**” the scholarship of **Timbuktu**. Many **manuscripts** from this area have been rescued in the town,

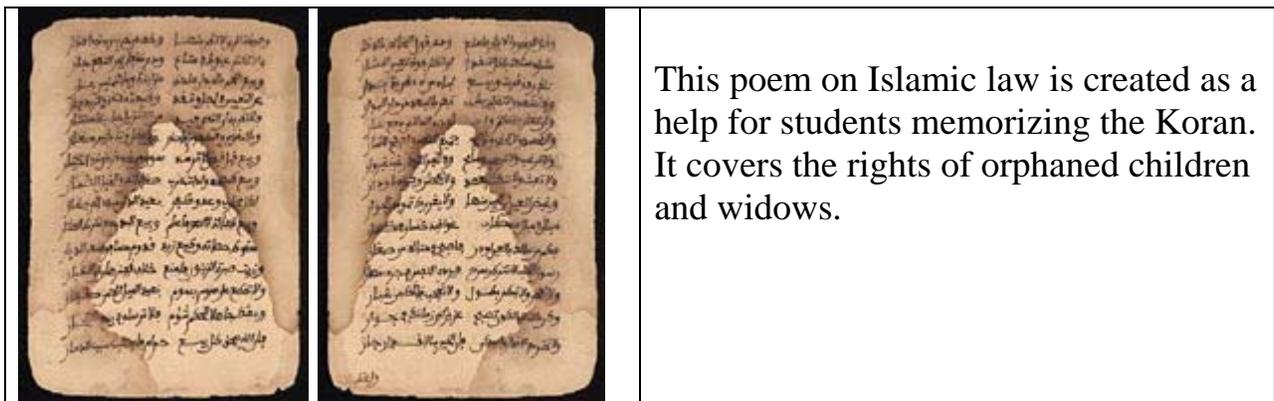
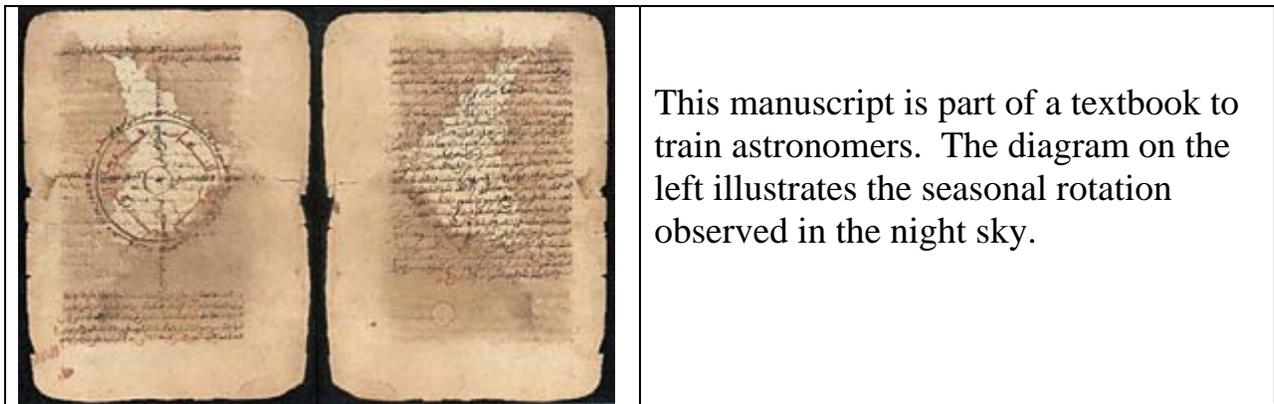
or removed for preservation and for profit. For example, see the work of the Timbuktu Educational Foundation <http://timbuktufoundation.org/> [note that this link does not imply an endorsement of this foundation] The January 2010 exhibit in Raleigh is a traveling exhibit provided by the International Museum of Muslim Cultures in Jackson, Mississippi.

<http://www.muslimmuseum.org/LegacyOfTibmuktu.aspx>

[View video about the manuscripts of Timbuktu](#)

The manuscripts make clear Timbuktu's role as an important center for scholarship in the Muslim world. They range over many subjects, such as astronomy, law, religion and good governance.

Here are just a few of the scholarly works rescued and preserved. To see more, go to the [Library of Congress Online Exhibition](#).





This author discusses the authority of governors and rulers and their limitations under Islamic law, calling attention to the need to understand the responsibility of power and its use.

Resources:

- [Basil Davidson History of West Africa](#)
- [Background and student activity](#)
- [PBS Explore the Wonders](#) (including clickable Africa map and The Road to Timbuktu)
- [Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The Road to Timbuktu, PBS](#) Images and descriptions on site
- [Video of Griot \(2 minutes\)](#)
- **Metropolitan Museum of Art Resources on Medieval West Africa**
 - [Trade and the Spread of Islam in Africa](#)
 - [Empires of the Western Sudan \(Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, maps and essays\)](#)
 - [Ways of Recording African History](#)
 - [The Trans-Saharan Gold Trade](#)
- **International Museum of Muslim Cultures in Jackson, Mississippi.**
<http://www.muslimmuseum.org/LegacyOfTibmuktu.aspx>
- **Kora Music**
[Mamadou Diabate website](#)

*The Legacy of Timbuktu: Wonders of the Written Word Exhibit**:

The exhibit will take place at the Cameron Village Regional Library in Raleigh, from January 23-29, 2010. For more information, contact Cultural Enrichment Services, Inc. at feviv@aol.com or call (919) 772-1768.

Cameron Village Regional Library 1930 Clark Avenue, Raleigh, NC 27605
(919) 856-6710 [Directions to Cameron Village Library](#)

* A World Heritage Series Event of The International Museum of Muslim Cultures in partnership with the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library of Timbuktu <http://www.muslimmuseum.org/LegacyOfTibmuktu.aspx>
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