**Timbuktu Hopes Ancient Texts Spark a Revival**

By Lydia Polgreen, New York Times – August 8, 2007

*EXCERPTS:*

TIMBUKTU, Mali — Ismaël Diadié Haïdara held a treasure in his slender fingers that has somehow endured through 11 generations — a square of battered leather enclosing a history of the two branches of his family. The musty collection of fragile, crumbling pages, written in the florid Arabic script of the sixteenth century, is also this once forgotten outpost's future.

A surge of interest in ancient books, hidden for centuries in houses along Timbuktu's dusty streets and in leather trunks in nomad camps, is raising hopes that Timbuktu — a city whose name has become a staccato synonym for nowhere — may once again claim a place at the intellectual heart of Africa.

This ancient city, a prisoner of the relentless sands of the Sahara and a changing world that prized access to the sea over the grooves worn by camel hooves across the dunes, is on the verge of a renaissance.

"We want to build an Alexandria for black Africa," said Mohamed Dicko, director of the Ahmed Baba Institute, a government-run library in Timbuktu. "This is our chance to regain our place in history."

The South African government is building a new library for the institute, a state-of-the-art facility that will house, catalog and digitize tens of thousands of books and make their contents available, many for the first time, to researchers. Charities and governments from Europe, the United States and the Middle East have poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into the city's musty family libraries, which are being expanded and transformed into research institutions, drawing scholars from around the world eager to translate and interpret the long forgotten manuscripts.

This new chapter in the story of Timbuktu, whose fortunes fell in the twilight of the Middle Ages, is almost as extraordinary as those that preceded it.

The geography that has doomed Timbuktu to obscurity in the popular imagination for half a millennium was once the reason for its greatness. It was founded as a trading post by nomads in the 11th century and later became part of the vast Mali Empire, then ultimately came under the control of the Songhai Empire.

For centuries it flourished because it sat between the great superhighways of the era — the Sahara, with its caravan routes carrying salt, cloth, spices and other riches from the north, and the Niger River, which carried gold and slaves from the rest of West Africa.

Traders brought books and manuscripts from across the Mediterranean and Middle East, and books were bought and sold in Timbuktu — in Arabic and local languages like Songhai and Tamashek, the language of the Tuareg people.

Timbuktu was home to the University of Sankore, which at its height had 25,000 scholars. An army of scribes, gifted in calligraphy, earned their living copying the manuscripts brought by travelers. Prominent families added those copies to their own libraries. As a result, Timbuktu became a repository of an extensive and eclectic collection of manuscripts.

"Astronomy, botany, pharmacology, geometry, geography, chemistry, biology," said Ali Imam Ben Essayouti, the descendant of a family of imams that keeps a vast library in one of the city's mosques. "There is Islamic law, family law, women's rights, human rights, laws regarding livestock, children's rights. All subjects under the sun, they are represented here."

Moroccan invaders deposed the Songhai empire in 1591, and the new rulers were hostile to the community of scholars, who were seen as malcontents. Facing persecution, many fled, taking many books with them.

West African sea routes overtook the importance of the old inland desert and river trade, and the city began its long decline. When the first European explorers stumbled across the once fabled city, they were stunned at its decrepitude. René Caillié, a French explorer who arrived here in 1828, said it was "a mass of ill-looking houses built of earth."

Mr. Caillié's description remains accurate today. For all its vaunted legend, Timbuktu remains a collection of low mud houses along narrow, trash-choked streets backed by sand dunes, difficult to reach and unimpressive on first sight. In 1990, Unesco designated it an endangered site because sand dunes threatened to swallow it.

Time, scorching desert heat, termites and sandstorms have taken a toll on the manuscripts. Most were locked in trunks or kept on dusty shelves for centuries, and their pages are brittle and crumbling, waterlogged and termite-eaten.

The Malian government has encouraged Islamic learning to flourish here once again, and there are dozens of Koranic schools where children and adults learn to read and recite the Koran. Training programs are teaching men and women how to classify, interpret and translate the documents, as well as preserve them for future study.