CHAPTER 11

Rethinking the Place of Timbuktu in the Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa

Bruce S. Hall

1 Introduction

Among the most important lessons that Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias has taught us in his writings is how to read the primary sources for pre-colonial West African history in more careful and critical ways. In his work on Arabic epigraphy in the Niger Bend, Moraes Farias showed how a naïve reliance on certain primary sources like the Taʾrīḫ al-Sūdān and the Taʾrīḫ al-fattāš had resulted in both a misinterpretation of early Songhay history, and an underestimation of the originality of the Timbuktu authors of the taʾrīḫ.⁠¹ The same mistake, in a slightly different form, has beset the characterization of the Arabic manuscripts extant in Timbuktu, and the symbolic role that has been ascribed to that town over the last half century. Because the taʾrīḫs celebrate the importance of Islamic scholarship – and of Muslim scholars – in Timbuktu’s rise to prominence, many historians relying on these texts as sources have made Timbuktu’s Muslim scholars a central focus of their reading of the history of the Songhay Empire, and of the Niger Bend region more broadly.² But the importance of Timbuktu as an intellectual Centre of Muslim scholarship in West Africa is rarely questioned. Instead, the ever-expanding numbers of

Arabic manuscripts which are claimed as extant in Timbuktu over the last two decades have only further cemented the idea of the town as the font of a late-medieval high intellectual culture which rivaled other famous Muslim intellectual Centres in Morocco and Egypt.

The story that I tell in this chapter decentres Timbuktu as a historical Muslim intellectual Centre in West Africa, and traces some of the ways in which the reputation of Timbuktu has been used to advance a variety of different goals. It also provides an empirical account of the exaggerations of claims about Arabic manuscript holdings and traces the institutions that have made this story known around the world. The chapter has two parts: the first part examines the making of the myth of Timbuktu as a hub of manuscript production; the second part suggests a methodology for re-reading the place of Timbuktu in the intellectual history of Muslim West Africa on the basis of an analysis of the extent to which scholarly production in Timbuktu was incorporated into other writings produced by Muslim scholars elsewhere in the West African region. In other words, the degree of the intertextuality in different genres of West African writing – how often West African writers cite other West African writers – can be understood as a gauge of the influence and the extent of organic, interconnected reading communities historically. The evidence presented in this chapter is only partial and preliminary, but it is meant as an outline of a method for a larger project of rethinking the networks of intellectual production and exchange across Muslim Africa.

2 The Work of the Manuscripts

Why is it that we know about Timbuktu’s Arabic manuscripts but not those of Oualata or Chinguetti in Mauritania, or Agadez in Niger? Why is it that tens of millions of dollars have been invested in manuscript preservation in Timbuktu, whereas very little money has been directed at other West African sites where there is an equally rich manuscript heritage? The answer is not that Timbuktu is uniquely well-endowed with manuscripts. The richest region of West Africa for Arabic manuscripts is almost certainly Mauritania. The manuscripts of

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4 It must be admitted that at least one large multi-million dollar project was undertaken in Mauritania. Between 2000–2004, the World Bank financed a project to create an inventory of Arabic manuscripts across Mauritania.