

Address at The SA-Mali Project Fundraising Dinner

T Georges Hotel, City of Tshwane, 27 September 2005

Distinguished
Ladies and Gentlemen

guests,

Thank you very much for your presence here today to support an important project - the South Africa-Mali Project for the preservation of the Timbuktu Manuscripts. As you know, that joint project was initiated by the governments of South Africa and Mali as part of our contribution to the renaissance of Africa.

This dinner has been organised to raise more funds to carry forward this vital project which must ensure that Timbuktu Manuscripts will always be available as part of the historic African literary, scientific and scholarly heritage. Your presence here tonight shows the importance you attach to this project.

Writing for National Geographic News on May 27, 2003, under the title, "Reclaiming the Ancient Manuscripts of Timbuktu", Chris Rainier said:

"Since the 12th century, accompanying the camel caravans rode the intrepid scholars of Islamic learning, bringing with them over time hundreds of thousands of manuscripts. These bound texts highlighted the great teachings of Islam during the Middle Ages. These sacred manuscripts covered an array of subjects: astronomy, medicine, mathematics, chemistry, judicial law, government, and Islamic conflict resolution. Islamic study during this period of human history, when the intellectual evolution had stalled in the rest of Europe was growing, evolving, and breaking new ground in the fields of science, mathematics, astronomy, law, and philosophy within the Muslim world.

"By the 1300s the "Ambassadors of Peace" centred around the University of Timbuktu created roving scholastic campuses and religious schools of learning that travelled between the cities of Timbuktu, Gao, and Djénné, helping to serve as a model of peaceful governance throughout an often conflict-riddled tribal region. At its peak, over 25,000 students attended the University of Timbuktu."

Chris Rainier quoted Issa Mohammed, president of the Timbuktu Heritage Institute, saying: "By stopping the illegal trafficking (in the manuscripts), not only we are preserving the heritage of Timbuktu, of the Islamic world, and of Africa, but we are preserving a message of love, peace, and living together in a multicultural world (recalling the fact that in ancient Timbuktu, Muslims, Jews and Christians had lived and worked together in peace.)"

For its part, the Timbuktu Educational Foundation based in California in the United States, said:

"All those of you who care and appreciate an African intellectual legacy, an Islamic legacy, an academic legacy and a spiritual legacy help save the endangered manuscripts of Timbuktu. There are 700,000 manuscripts in Timbuktu and surroundings that are on the verge of being lost if the appropriate action is not taken. These manuscripts represent a turning point in the history of Africa and its people. The translation and publication of the manuscripts of Timbuktu will restore self-respect, pride, honour and dignity to the people of Africa and those descended from Africa; it will also obliterate the stereo-typical images of Tarzan and primitive savages as true representation of Africa and its civilization.

"The manuscripts of Timbuktu are a living testimony of the highly advanced and refined civilization in Sub-Saharan Africa. Before the European Renaissance, Timbuktu flourished as the greatest academic and commercial center in Africa. Great empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were proofs of the talents, creativity and ingenuity of the African people. The University of Timbuktu produced both Black African scholars and leaders of the highest rank, character and nobility."

Those who have had the privilege to visit the ancient city of Timbuktu will know the modest building housing the Ahmed Baba Institute where these medieval manuscripts are kept.

We undertook the Timbuktu Project because we all agreed that the modest facilities of Ahmed Baba Institute and the limited resources available for the preservation of these manuscripts meant that over time most of them would fall into a serious state of disrepair, and many would be lost to the illegal traffic.

Clearly, we cannot allow such a critical part of the African history to die, because such a death would mean erasing an important link to our glorious past.

Accordingly, through this Project we have already trained a team of Malian heritage professionals and conservators. At the same time, a team of academics, including South Africans, are busy studying the manuscripts. Preparations to erect a new library building and other facilities in Timbuktu are well on course.

The Collins Concise English Dictionary still includes reference to Timbuktu as 'any distance or outlandish place'. As we know, outlandish can mean bizarre, peculiar, strange, eccentric, weird or odd.

It may well be because of ignorance that such a reference is made to a great ancient city and centre of scholarship and religion. Indeed, it may well be because of the fact that much of the African history has been 'hidden' from outsiders as well as from many other Africans that there developed an idea of Timbuktu as an outlandish place in an unknown location. But of course, this derogatory reference to Timbuktu is consistent with racist view of Africa that has prevailed in Europe for many centuries.

Yet we know that as part of the state of Songai, for more than hundred years, Timbuktu thrived as an intellectual centre that attracted scholars from as far a-field as Asia and Europe. It is most appropriate that UNESCO has proclaimed Timbuktu a World Heritage Site.

Today, as we engage the process of the African Renaissance, Timbuktu is one of the critical Projects that we should ensure succeeds. The Timbuktu Manuscripts Project, which in our country is a Presidential Initiative, is also NEPAD's first Cultural Project.

With regard to Culture NEPAD says that: "Culture is an integral part of development efforts on the continent. Consequently, it is essential to protect and effectively utilise indigenous knowledge that represents a major dimension of the continent's culture, and to share this knowledge for the benefit of humankind."

It further says that: "The New Partnership for Africa's Development will give special attention to the protection and nurturing of indigenous knowledge, which includes tradition-based literacy, artistic and scientific works, inventions, scientific discoveries, designs, marks, names and symbols, undisclosed information and all tradition-based innovations and creations resulting from intellectual activity in the industrial, scientific, literary or artistic fields. The term also includes genetic resources and associated knowledge." (P35, NEPAD Document)

Part of the NEPAD programme is to encourage collaboration among governments, state institutions, universities, research institutions, the private sector and civil society organisations so as to use the available capacity and resources to accelerate the process of the regeneration of the continent.

The Timbuktu Manuscripts Project is an outstanding example of this collaboration. I would like to thank everybody present here tonight for turning the dream of partnership and collaboration among ourselves as Africans into reality. Your contribution to this effort will serve to inspire similar efforts elsewhere on our continent, encouraging the critically important spirit of self reliance.

I would like to express my appreciation for the generous contributions that business and individuals, both in government and private sector, are making to ensure that this Project succeeds. I would also like to thank the team of professionals that are working on the different parts of this Project, from preservation, restoration and the work on the construction of the library in Timbuktu. We appreciate your work very much.

I know that those of us present here tonight will once more contribute generously to a Project that will add enormously to the advance towards the renaissance of our continent.

Thank you.