

Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the opening of the Timbuktu Script and Scholarship Manuscripts

Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town, 7th August 2008

Chairperson,
Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan,
Minister in the Presidency, Essop Pahad,
Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Mali, Prof. Amadou Toure,
Chairperson of the Board of Iziko, Dr. Eltie Links,
The Premier of the Western Cape, Lynne Brown,
The Mayor of Cape Town, Helen Zille,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

I am honoured to be here tonight officially to open this remarkable exhibition Timbuktu script and scholarship

This exhibition has been in preparation for sometime now. It is good that we finally welcome these manuscripts to South Africa. I am very pleased that the

- Iziko Museums of Cape Town
- was charged with the responsibility to co-ordinate this exhibition of manuscripts from Timbuktu. They have done a most impressive job in hosting and presenting these valuable works of scholarship.

This event is yet another milestone in our collaboration with the government and people of Mali to focus on their rich cultural heritage and specifically on their traditions of African Islamic book arts and scholarship. Earlier this year,

- a major collection of scholarly essays on the manuscripts, called
- The meanings of Timbuktu,
- was published by the HSRC Press. We are indeed very happy that this exhibition complements that collection of essays very well.

Both the essays and this exhibition point to the high quality of work that our researchers and museum experts are doing as well the good collaboration between these experts and their colleagues from across the African continent.

This exhibition of a representative selection of manuscripts from the Ahmed Baba Institute is partly a consummation of the process started in 2001, when the governments of Mali and South Africa committed themselves to the preservation of the great written heritage of Timbuktu.

This is a relatively small selection of manuscripts from the many thousands of items in the Timbuktu archives and the surrounding settlements.

Despite this, I consider our having this body of materials here to be a great privilege and of historic importance.

Chairperson,

The idea of Timbuktu at the Castle is a clear indication of our vision of consolidating historical ties with the rest of the African continent.

It was very necessary to bring to South Africa a sample of items because of the huge interest in our own country, and internationally, in the West African traditions of manuscript production.

South Africa is also taking the lead in various aspects of the conservation and research on the manuscripts. We are, of course, also nearing completion of a new home for the manuscripts in Timbuktu, which will be a state-of-the art archive.

The 40 items here, of various sizes and content, dealing with numerous aspects of West African Islamic scholarship articulate in their complexity and beauty why we were so convinced of the need to do something serious and effective about them when we visited Timbuktu in 2001.

While we had always heard of the legendary tradition of learning of that city it was a revelation to lay eyes on such a dense and distinctive range of written materials.

As the exhibition travels through major South African cities many of our people will now also be able to see the rich diversity of written materials from Timbuktu.

Various kinds of writing materials and subjects are covered, revealing a multifaceted past of sophisticated reading and writing culture in West Africa, and reflecting a tradition of prodigious intellectual production.

These materials point to a lively and changing intellectual environment in and around Timbuktu; they express an African intellectual engagement with a larger world of ideas going beyond the borders of the continent yet firmly rooted in a local setting.

All of us, as South Africans and indeed many fellow Africans are proud to be associated with this first major travelling exhibition of Timbuktu manuscripts from the Ahmad Baba library, the first to go beyond the frontiers of the Republic of Mali.

Chairperson,

It is most significant that we are doing this here in this castle, a monument of colonisation but which in recent years has been transformed into a significant heritage space in Cape Town.

In the past decade the Department of Arts and Culture has worked relentlessly and systematically to transform the heritage sector of the country. As a result, we have made significant advances in making our museums reflect the values of our young democracy.

Because of this work, our museums have moved from being old and outdated bastions representing past, racist ideologies to being part of a new non-racial, non-sexist society. Our heritage sector is working in much more dynamic and creative ways in our new South African context yet learning and interacting with international trends and innovations.

Further, our museums are becoming genuinely open public institutions reflecting the multiple, intersecting histories and constituencies of our country and continent.

In this context, Iziko Museums of Cape Town have progressed far along the path of transformation often under difficult conditions. The challenges of bringing together about a dozen separate units under one umbrella, Iziko, and transforming structures, policies and displays, shows the tremendous work involved in changing our heritage sector.

It also points to the seriousness with which we take our museums and heritage sector.

Many museums may seem to be inert, beautiful old buildings holding the old silver of the ruling dynasties of the past and the art of the old masters.

But there are other ways of conceiving of museums for they are in fact spaces of tremendous potential for democratic reflection and civic education. They are spaces open for continuing change and interpretation of the past, present and future.

Accordingly, museums play a very important role in any society and should not be neglected or marginalised as a luxury for a minority. It is in this context that the work of the

- Iziko Museums of Cape Town
- is so crucial and adds to the significance of this exhibition in the Western Cape.

Chairperson,

We do not often enough extend beyond the boundaries of our country to collaborate with museums elsewhere on the continent to bring to our country for exhibition the wealth of artifacts and art of the continent.

We need to do this far more often and make a commitment to use our extensive heritage spaces to represent the creativity of our continent in all its richness and complexity.

Through systematic co-operation and ethical collaboration as equals to conserve our heritage sector we can produce interesting and elegant exhibitions equal to the best in the most famous museums of the world.

The best exhibitions are grounded in systematic research and make connections between past and present, between artifacts and the societies from which they originate.

They open up possibilities for thinking in new ways about the world. Indeed, the manuscripts from Timbuktu provide us with the opportunity to look at history afresh.

The libraries of Timbuktu force us to think anew about the very notion of a library and an archive. They help us to take a closer look at the manuscripts as documents reflecting human effort and communication, and as documents with genealogies that include other works produced elsewhere.

Cumulatively, these items are a unique archive; they are an archive of their unique content but also an archive of the history of a unique tradition of book production.

The Timbuktu manuscripts point to a dense archive that is in reality only beginning to be unearthed and discovered in new ways and we are proud to be part of this exciting process.

In our effort to advertise this legacy we are also saying that there is an urgent need to rethink African history, there is an urgent need to do more research and produce a new body of knowledge about Africa and there is an urgent need for Africa to define herself.

An exhibition of this nature in South Africa is therefore another reminder of our larger continental connection and of our living history about which we all need to learn much more, study and research.

As I said at the outset, it is a pleasure to welcome these manuscripts to Cape Town tonight. I want to thank the CEO, Prof. Bredenkamp, and his team, especially the Social History division of the museum, and the rest of the team, including the long-established participants in the Timbuktu project at the

National Archives as well as the University of Cape Town. In this context, I also thank Minister Pallo Jordan and the Ministry and the Department of Arts and Culture.

Many thanks to Minister Essop Pahad for his commitment to the Timbuktu project and for having kept all the diverse elements of the project closely co-ordinated.

We have to continue this trans-African engagement and conversation and clearly the Timbuktu project does point us in a right direction.

Thank you.