

## Timbuktu Script & Scholarship



### MEDIA RELEASE

**Exhibition: Timbuktu Script & Scholarship**  
**Venue: National Library of South Africa**  
**Dates: 23 September – 8 October 2008**

*Timbuktu Script & Scholarship* is an exhibition of about 40 manuscripts from the holdings of the Ahmed Baba Institute (IHERI-AB) in Timbuktu, Mali. Some of these manuscripts are hundreds of years old, and were written in a variety of styles of Arabic calligraphy by scholars and copyists who were part of an African Islamic intellectual tradition centred in Timbuktu. Some of the manuscripts are beautifully decorated with gold illumination and kept in finely tooled leather covers. By celebrating these manuscripts as African cultural treasures, the exhibition strives to promote the values and objectives of the African renaissance.

The exhibition opens on 8 August at the Iziko Granary in the Castle of Good Hope, and runs there until 3 September 2008. It then travels to Grahamstown, Pretoria/Tshwane Bloemfontein, Durban and Johannesburg.

Timbuktu, situated near the Niger River at the southern edge of the Sahara, was established in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and flourished as a commercial centre, both for the salt trade from the north and the gold and slave trade from the south. Traders also brought their religion, and Islam spread from North Africa to become widely established in large areas of West Africa and along the coast of East Africa.

Timbuktu became an important centre of Islamic learning between 1300 and 1600 AD, drawing scholars to the Sankore mosque and private homes, where Islamic studies were pursued and knowledge was passed on. Here scholars read the manuscripts brought from other parts of the Islamic world, and copyists rewrote them for further distribution. New knowledge and intellectual debates produced additional works, and religious and private libraries flourished.

Most of the manuscripts were written in Arabic, but some very interesting examples were written in African languages, such as Tamasheq, Fulani and Hausa, using Arabic script. A variety of calligraphic styles was used, including Sudani, Suqi and Sahrawi. Paper was imported through North Africa from European sources that can be traced through a study of the watermarks. The written pages were not bound but were stored in fine leather covers.

The aim of the exhibition is to make the scholarship and written legacy of Africa better known. The subject matter of the manuscripts in the holdings of the Ahmed Baba Institute reveals the vibrant atmosphere of piety, debate, scientific enquiry and literary accomplishment that flourished in Timbuktu at the height of its period as a centre of scholarship.

The exhibition includes manuscripts ranging in subject matter from religion to astronomy and mathematics, as well as history and literary forms. It also includes manuscripts covering legal judgements and commercial transactions that give a sense of the daily life of the citizens of Timbuktu.

The exhibition is an integral part of the South Africa-Mali project which was initiated by President Mbeki in 2002. As a flagship cultural initiative of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the project aims to conserve the important collection of manuscripts held at the Ahmed Baba institute of Higher Islamic Studies in Timbuktu through the training of conservation staff and the construction of a building to house the collection of the Ahmed Baba Institute.

*Timbuktu Script & Scholarship* is complemented by a catalogue, edited by University of Cape Town historian, Dr Shamil Jeppie. In addition, Iziko Museums has produced a range of educational resources to accompany the exhibition.

The exhibition is funded by the national Department of Arts and Culture and supported by Standard Bank.

#### **Exhibition tour schedule**

Cape Town: Granary, Iziko at the Castle of Good Hope, 8 August – 3 September 2008  
Grahamstown: Albany Museum, 9 – 15 September 2008  
Pretoria/Tshwane: National Library of South Africa, 23 September – 8 October 2008  
Bloemfontein: Oliewenhuis Art Museum, 15 - 29 October 2008  
Durban: Durban Art Gallery, 5 – 16 November 2008  
Johannesburg: Standard Bank Gallery, 21 November – 1 December 2008

#### **ENDS**

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**HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGES AVAILABLE ON REQUEST**

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Granary, Iziko at the Castle of Good Hope  
Darling Street  
Cape Town  
Tel: 021 464 1264  
Opening hours: Daily 09:30-16:00

#### **Admission:**

- „ Adults - R20 (Sunday R10)
- „ Children - R10 (Sunday R5)
- „ Booked school groups - R5 per learner
- „ Pensioners with SA pensioner card - R15

„ Students with SA student card - R10

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Issued by The Heritage Agency on behalf of Iziko Museums of Cape Town.

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