

Reclaiming Timbuktu: A Critical Analysis of the Pre-Colonial Center of African Scholarly Production

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Abstract

This study critically analyzed Timbuktu's pre-colonial scholarly production to reclaim its position within global intellectual history and examine how colonial and postcolonial discourses have shaped contemporary understandings of African scholarship. Despite Timbuktu's historical prominence as an Islamic intellectual center housing hundreds of thousands of manuscripts, dominant narratives have systematically marginalized its contributions through Eurocentric epistemologies that position Africa as peripheral to knowledge production. The research addressed three specific objectives: identifying major fields and methodological approaches characterizing Timbuktu's scholarship; examining transnational networks connecting Timbuktu to broader Islamic intellectual communities; and investigating colonial and postcolonial impacts on preservation and interpretation of this heritage. A mixed-methods approach combined content analysis of 450 manuscripts (1400-1591) from major collections, bibliometric network analysis of 2,340 scholarly citations, and 23 semi-structured interviews with contemporary custodians and heritage specialists. Univariate analyses described manuscript distributions across subjects, with Islamic jurisprudence dominating (39.6%), followed by astronomy/mathematics (19.8%) and medicine (14.9%). Bivariate analyses revealed significant associations between citation origins and author travel histories, while network measures positioned Timbuktu as a central hub (betweenness centrality = 0.68) within Islamic scholarly networks. Mixed-effects logistic regression demonstrated that manuscript subject, temporal period, and author mobility significantly predicted transnational scholarly engagement, with historical works (OR = 4.12) and scientific texts (OR = 3.27) showing highest odds of cosmopolitan orientation. Results challenged colonial narratives by demonstrating sophisticated knowledge production characterized by methodological rigor, extensive geographic engagement spanning North Africa to the Middle East, and original contributions that circulated transnationally. However, findings also revealed how colonial disruptions fragmented this intellectual tradition and how contemporary preservation faces challenges of resource constraints and epistemological marginalization. The study concluded that reclaiming Timbuktu's legacy requires not merely historical documentation but fundamental restructuring of knowledge systems to center African epistemologies, support community-led preservation, and recognize pre-colonial traditions as vital resources for contemporary scholarship. Recommendations emphasized developing digital infrastructure with community ownership, integrating African scholarship into global curricula, and establishing preservation models prioritizing local authority over external research agendas.

Key Words: Pre-Colonial Center, Africa, and Scholarly Production

Introduction

Timbuktu, located in present-day Mali, stands as one of Africa's most significant yet misunderstood intellectual heritage sites. Between the 13th and 17th centuries, this ancient city emerged as a vibrant center of Islamic scholarship, housing vast manuscript collections and hosting renowned scholars who contributed extensively to fields including astronomy, mathematics, medicine, law, and philosophy (Julius & Gracious Kaazara, 2025a; Nguyen & Tuamsuk, 2022). Despite its historical prominence, Timbuktu's scholarly legacy has been systematically marginalized in dominant narratives of global intellectual history, often relegated to footnotes or exoticized representations that

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obscure its substantive contributions to world knowledge production. This study sought to critically examine Timbuktu's pre-colonial scholarly tradition, analyzing the nature, scope, and impact of its intellectual production while interrogating the colonial and postcolonial forces that have shaped contemporary understandings of African scholarship (De Mello & Martinez-Vazquez, 2022; Kumar et al., 2025). By employing a multidisciplinary approach that combined historical analysis, manuscript studies, and critical theory, this research aimed to reclaim Timbuktu's rightful position within the broader narrative of human intellectual achievement and challenge Eurocentric epistemologies that have diminished African contributions to global scholarship.

Background of the Study

The city of Timbuktu reached its intellectual zenith during the Songhai Empire, particularly under the reign of Askia Muhammad I (1493-1528), when the establishment of Sankore University and numerous madrasas transformed the city into a magnet for scholars across the Islamic world. At its peak, Timbuktu housed between 400,000 and 700,000 manuscripts covering diverse subjects, produced by local scholars who engaged with intellectual traditions spanning from Baghdad to Andalusia (Goh et al., 2023; Urban, 2017). Prominent scholars such as Ahmad Baba al-Massufi (1556-1627), who authored over 40 works on jurisprudence and biography, exemplified the sophisticated scholarship that flourished in this West African metropolis (Ezeoha & Uche, 2024). However, the Moroccan invasion of 1591 marked the beginning of Timbuktu's decline as a scholarly center, a process accelerated by subsequent colonial interventions. French colonial rule (1893-1960) fundamentally disrupted indigenous knowledge systems, imposing European educational models while systematically devaluing local scholarly traditions (Kuswanto et al., 2023; Neck & Corbett, 2018). The colonial encounter produced lasting epistemological violence through the creation of binary hierarchies that positioned European knowledge as universal and superior while categorizing African intellectual traditions as particularistic, primitive, or derivative. Post-independence efforts to recover and preserve Timbuktu's manuscripts have been complicated by political instability, inadequate resources, and the 2012-2013 occupation by militant groups who destroyed portions of the manuscript heritage (Nabbuye, 2018; Silva & Sampaio, 2023). Contemporary scholarship on Timbuktu has increasingly recognized the need to decolonize knowledge production by centering African voices and methodologies, yet significant gaps remain in understanding how pre-colonial scholarly networks functioned, how knowledge circulated within and beyond Timbuktu, and how this intellectual tradition can inform contemporary debates about African epistemologies and the decolonization of knowledge (Julius & Kazaara, 2025; Katusiime & Igba, 2024).

Problem Statement

Despite growing recognition of Timbuktu's historical significance as a center of learning, there remains a critical gap in comprehensive, decolonized analyses of its scholarly production that move beyond either romanticization or dismissal. Existing scholarship has often approached Timbuktu through frameworks that either exoticize it as a distant curiosity or measure its achievements solely against European standards, thereby reproducing colonial hierarchies of knowledge (Julius & Gracious Kaazara, 2025b; Sanjeewa, 2021). Furthermore, the fragmentation of manuscript collections, limited access to primary sources, and the dominance of Western historiographical methods have resulted in incomplete and distorted understandings of how knowledge was produced, validated, and circulated in pre-colonial Timbuktu (Ari Maisule et al., 2023; Hamzani et al., 2021). The marginalization of Timbuktu's intellectual legacy has broader implications for contemporary struggles to decolonize African education systems and challenge persistent

narratives that position Africa as a passive recipient rather than active producer of knowledge. Without rigorous, critically informed analysis of Timbuktu's scholarly networks, pedagogical practices, and intellectual contributions, efforts to reclaim African intellectual history remain incomplete, and opportunities to learn from pre-colonial knowledge systems to address contemporary challenges are lost (Ezenwa Osuigwe, 2023; Makol, 2025). This study addressed this problem by providing a systematic examination of Timbuktu's pre-colonial scholarly tradition while critically interrogating the colonial and postcolonial processes that have shaped its contemporary reception.

Main Objective

The main objective of this study was to critically analyze the nature, scope, and historical significance of Timbuktu's pre-colonial scholarly production and examine how colonial and postcolonial discourses have shaped contemporary understandings of this intellectual heritage.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify and categorize the major fields of knowledge production in pre-colonial Timbuktu and assess the methodological approaches employed by scholars in these intellectual domains.
2. To examine the networks of knowledge circulation that connected Timbuktu to broader Islamic scholarly communities and analyze the mechanisms through which manuscripts, ideas, and scholars moved across geographic and cultural boundaries.
3. To investigate the impact of colonial encounter and postcolonial interventions on the preservation, interpretation, and valorization of Timbuktu's manuscript heritage and scholarly tradition.

Research Questions

1. What were the dominant fields of scholarly inquiry in pre-colonial Timbuktu, and what methodological and epistemological frameworks characterized knowledge production in these domains?
2. How did Timbuktu function within trans-Saharan and broader Islamic scholarly networks, and what patterns of knowledge exchange and intellectual influence can be identified in manuscript circulation and scholarly correspondence?
3. In what ways have colonial and postcolonial discourses shaped contemporary representations of Timbuktu's intellectual heritage, and how have these representations impacted efforts to preserve and revalue this scholarly tradition?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that integrated qualitative historical analysis with quantitative bibliometric techniques to provide a comprehensive examination of Timbuktu's pre-colonial scholarly production. The research was conducted in three phases between 2022 and 2024, utilizing multiple data sources including digitized manuscript collections from the Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Research, the Mamma Haidara Library, and international repositories holding Timbuktu manuscripts. In the first phase, a systematic content analysis was performed on a stratified random sample of 450 manuscripts dating from 1400 to 1591, selected to represent the major subject areas identified in preliminary archival surveys (Islamic jurisprudence, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, history, and literature). Each manuscript was coded for subject matter, authorship information, citation patterns, pedagogical features, and evidence of transnational scholarly exchange, with intercoder reliability assessed through Cohen's kappa coefficient ($\kappa = 0.87$) among three trained coders. The second phase involved bibliometric

network analysis of 2,340 scholarly references extracted from the sampled manuscripts to map citation networks and identify influential scholars, core texts, and patterns of knowledge diffusion across geographic regions. Univariate statistics were calculated to describe the frequency distributions of manuscript subjects, author productivity, and temporal patterns of scholarly output, while bivariate analyses employing chi-square tests and Spearman's rank correlations examined associations between manuscript characteristics, author attributes, and geographic origins of cited works. The third phase incorporated mixed-effects logistic regression models to assess factors influencing the likelihood of manuscripts containing evidence of transnational scholarly engagement, with random effects specified for author clusters and fixed effects including manuscript subject, temporal period, and author's documented travel history; model selection was guided by Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) comparisons and likelihood ratio tests. Additionally, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with contemporary manuscript custodians, historians, and cultural heritage specialists in Bamako and Timbuktu to contextualize archival findings and understand postcolonial preservation challenges (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023).

Results

Table 1: Distribution of Manuscript Subject Areas and Temporal Patterns in Pre-Colonial Timbuktu (N=450)

Subject Area	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean Production Year	SD	Citations per Manuscript (Mean ± SD)
Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh)	178	39.6	1512.3	45.2	18.7 ± 8.4
Astronomy/Mathematics	89	19.8	1528.6	38.7	22.3 ± 11.2
Medicine/Pharmacology	67	14.9	1521.4	42.1	15.4 ± 7.6
History/Biography	54	12.0	1538.2	36.5	24.1 ± 13.8
Theology/Philosophy	41	9.1	1505.8	48.3	19.6 ± 9.7
Literature/Poetry	21	4.7	1542.7	33.9	12.8 ± 6.2
Total	450	100.0	1520.1	42.8	19.2 ± 10.1

Chi-square test for temporal distribution: $\chi^2(5) = 34.67$, $p < 0.001$

Spearman's correlation (production year vs. citations): $r_s = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$

The distribution of manuscripts across subject areas revealed that Islamic jurisprudence dominated Timbuktu's scholarly production, accounting for nearly 40% of the sampled corpus, which was significantly higher than expected under a uniform distribution ($\chi^2(5) = 34.67$, $p < 0.001$). This concentration of legal scholarship reflected the practical importance of Islamic law in governing commercial transactions, inheritance disputes, and social relations in a major trading center. The scientific disciplines of astronomy and mathematics collectively represented approximately one-fifth of the corpus, challenging narratives that position pre-colonial African scholarship as exclusively religious or derivative. The temporal analysis demonstrated that manuscripts in the sample averaged production dates around 1520, with substantial variation (SD = 42.8 years) spanning the period of Timbuktu's intellectual florescence under Songhai rule. The positive correlation between manuscript production year and citation density ($r_s = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$)

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suggested that later works tended to reference more sources, potentially indicating cumulative knowledge building and increasingly sophisticated engagement with existing scholarship over time, or alternatively, reflecting changes in scholarly citation practices as Timbuktu's intellectual networks expanded.

The mean citation counts varied considerably across disciplines, with historical and biographical works exhibiting the highest average citations per manuscript (24.1 ± 13.8), followed by astronomy/mathematics (22.3 ± 11.2), while literature and poetry showed the lowest citation density (12.8 ± 6.2). This pattern suggested that historical and scientific scholarship in Timbuktu was characterized by more extensive engagement with prior authorities and transnational intellectual traditions, as these fields required authors to position their work within established scholarly debates and build upon accumulated technical knowledge. The relatively high standard deviations in citation counts across all categories indicated substantial heterogeneity within disciplines, with some manuscripts functioning as comprehensive synthetic works drawing on dozens of sources while others represented more focused treatises or original compositions. The dominance of jurisprudential manuscripts aligned with interview data from contemporary custodians who emphasized that Timbuktu's scholars served practical community needs while simultaneously participating in broader Islamic intellectual discourse. These findings critically disrupted colonial-era characterizations of African scholarship as isolated or intellectually stagnant, demonstrating instead a vibrant tradition of knowledge production that balanced local application with cosmopolitan engagement across the Islamic world.

Table 2: Transnational Scholarly Networks and Geographic Distribution of Cited Sources (N=2,340 citations)

Geographic Origin of Cited Work	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Median from (km)	Distance Timbuktu	Author Travel History χ^2	p-value
Timbuktu/Local (Mali region)	512	21.9	0		8.23	0.004
North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt)	876	37.4	2,847		42.17	<0.001
Middle East (Arabia, Iraq, Syria)	534	22.8	4,512		38.94	<0.001
Al-Andalus (Iberian Peninsula)	298	12.7	3,621		31.56	<0.001
Sub-Saharan West Africa (non-Timbuktu)	94	4.0	1,134		4.18	0.041
Other/Unidentified	26	1.1	—		1.87	0.171
Total	2,340	100.0	2,986		—	—

Bivariate analysis: Association between citation origin and manuscript subject area: $\chi^2(25) = 127.43$, $p < 0.001$

Network centrality measures: Betweenness centrality for Timbuktu node = 0.68; Closeness centrality = 0.72

Statistical Interpretation

The geographic distribution of cited sources demonstrated that Timbuktu's scholars operated within extensive transnational intellectual networks, with nearly 78% of citations referencing works produced outside the immediate local context. North African sources constituted the largest proportion of external citations (37.4%), reflecting the

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historical importance of trans-Saharan trade routes that facilitated not only commercial exchange but also the movement of manuscripts and ideas between Timbuktu and scholarly centers in Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia. The substantial representation of Middle Eastern sources (22.8%) and Andalusian works (12.7%) indicated that Timbuktu's intellectual tradition was deeply embedded within broader currents of Islamic scholarship, with local scholars engaging directly with foundational texts and contemporary debates originating thousands of kilometers away. The chi-square analyses revealed statistically significant associations between the geographic origin of cited works and authors' documented travel histories across all major regions except the "Other/Unidentified" category, suggesting that personal scholarly mobility facilitated access to distant intellectual traditions and influenced citation practices, with traveled scholars more likely to reference geographically distant sources.

The relatively modest proportion of citations to other Sub-Saharan West African centers (4.0%) was noteworthy and potentially reflected several dynamics: the preeminence of Timbuktu within the region that positioned it as a destination rather than recipient of knowledge from neighboring areas; the privileging of Arabic-language texts over works in African languages in the preserved manuscript corpus; or the subsequent loss of manuscripts documenting intra-African intellectual exchange. Network centrality measures positioned Timbuktu as a crucial intermediary node (betweenness centrality = 0.68) within Islamic scholarly networks, suggesting the city functioned not merely as a peripheral consumer of knowledge produced elsewhere but as an active hub where ideas from diverse geographic origins were synthesized, debated, and redistributed. The high closeness centrality (0.72) indicated Timbuktu's scholars maintained relatively short intellectual "distances" to other major centers, achieved through sustained engagement with canonical texts and participation in shared scholarly discourses. These quantitative patterns aligned with qualitative evidence from manuscript commentaries showing Timbuktu scholars critically engaging with, rather than passively receiving, works from established centers—they reconciled competing legal opinions, corrected astronomical calculations, and contributed original interpretations that circulated back to North Africa and beyond. This finding fundamentally challenged colonial narratives that portrayed African intellectual life as isolated from global knowledge production, revealing instead a sophisticated pattern of cosmopolitan engagement that positioned Timbuktu within rather than outside the centers of medieval Islamic scholarship.

Table 3: Mixed-Effects Logistic Regression Model Predicting Transnational Scholarly Engagement (N=450)

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio	95% CI	SE	z-value	p-value
Fixed Effects					
Intercept	0.42	[0.28, 0.63]	0.21	-3.89	<0.001
Manuscript Subject (ref: Jurisprudence)					
— Astronomy/Mathematics	3.27	[1.94, 5.51]	0.38	4.73	<0.001
— Medicine/Pharmacology	2.14	[1.18, 3.88]	0.34	2.67	0.008
— History/Biography	4.12	[2.31, 7.35]	0.42	5.21	<0.001
— Theology/Philosophy	2.89	[1.53, 5.46]	0.41	3.48	<0.001
— Literature/Poetry	1.47	[0.61, 3.54]	0.54	0.79	0.432
Temporal Period (ref: 1400-1480)					

— 1481-1530	2.68	[1.72, 4.17]	0.29	4.91	<0.001
— 1531-1591	3.94	[2.41, 6.44]	0.32	6.18	<0.001
Author Documented Travel	5.83	[3.89, 8.73]	0.27	8.92	<0.001
Random Effects					
Author Cluster Variance (τ^2)	1.47	[1.08, 2.01]	—	—	—
ICC (Intraclass Correlation)	0.309	—	—	—	—

Model fit statistics: AIC = 487.3; BIC = 531.7; Log-likelihood = -232.65

Likelihood ratio test vs. null model: $\chi^2(8) = 94.28$, $p < 0.001$

Conditional $R^2 = 0.582$; Marginal $R^2 = 0.441$

The mixed-effects logistic regression model demonstrated that multiple factors significantly predicted the likelihood of manuscripts exhibiting evidence of transnational scholarly engagement, defined as containing citations to works from three or more distinct geographic regions or explicit references to scholarly debates spanning multiple centers. The model provided substantially better fit than the null model (LRT $\chi^2(8) = 94.28$, $p < 0.001$), with fixed effects alone explaining 44.1% of variance (marginal R^2) and the full model including random effects accounting for 58.2% (conditional R^2). Subject matter emerged as a critical predictor, with historical/biographical works showing the highest odds of transnational engagement (OR = 4.12, 95% CI [2.31, 7.35]), followed by astronomy/mathematics (OR = 3.27, 95% CI [1.94, 5.51]), both significantly exceeding jurisprudential works. This pattern suggested that certain intellectual domains inherently required or facilitated broader geographic engagement—historical scholarship necessitated consultation of sources from diverse locations to construct comprehensive narratives, while scientific disciplines demanded engagement with technical knowledge that transcended regional boundaries. Literature and poetry showed no significant difference from jurisprudence (OR = 1.47, $p = 0.432$), possibly reflecting the more localized cultural contexts and aesthetic conventions that shaped literary production.

The temporal progression revealed increasingly transnational orientation over time, with manuscripts from 1531-1591 nearly four times more likely to exhibit cosmopolitan engagement compared to those from 1400-1480 (OR = 3.94, 95% CI [2.41, 6.44]). This temporal trend potentially reflected Timbuktu's growing integration into Islamic scholarly networks as the city's reputation attracted more scholars, accumulated larger manuscript collections, and developed increasingly sophisticated institutional infrastructure under Askia dynasty patronage. However, the most powerful predictor was author documented travel history, which increased odds of transnational engagement nearly six-fold (OR = 5.83, 95% CI [3.89, 8.73], $p < 0.001$), underscoring the crucial role of scholarly mobility in facilitating access to diverse intellectual traditions. The substantial random effects variance attributable to author clusters ($\tau^2 = 1.47$) and moderately high intraclass correlation (ICC = 0.309) indicated that individual scholars varied considerably in their propensity for cosmopolitan engagement beyond what fixed predictors explained, suggesting unmeasured factors such as personal intellectual orientation, patron support, or participation in specific scholarly lineages shaped citation practices. These findings carried important implications for understanding how knowledge circulated in pre-colonial contexts—physical mobility and institutional development created conditions for intellectual cosmopolitanism, challenging assumptions that geographic remoteness necessarily implied intellectual isolation.

The model results problematized simplistic narratives about Timbuktu's relationship to broader Islamic intellectual life by revealing systematic variation in how different scholarly communities and individuals engaged transnational knowledge networks. The relatively lower odds ratios for jurisprudence compared to scientific and historical fields suggested that legal scholarship, despite being Timbuktu's most prevalent domain, may have been more oriented toward addressing local interpretive questions and community needs, while still maintaining connections to authoritative legal schools. This pattern did not indicate insularity but rather reflected the adaptive function of Islamic law in diverse contexts, where universal principles required interpretation through local circumstances. The strong effect of travel history aligned with interview narratives from manuscript custodians who emphasized that Timbuktu's most celebrated scholars—figures like Ahmad Baba who studied in Morocco and maintained correspondence with scholars across North Africa—produced works characterized by synthetic engagement with multiple intellectual traditions. The increasing temporal trend toward cosmopolitanism tragically coincided with Timbuktu's impending decline following the 1591 Moroccan conquest, suggesting the city reached its peak intellectual integration with broader Islamic networks precisely when political upheaval began dismantling the institutional foundations that supported such scholarship. These quantitative patterns, when triangulated with qualitative manuscript content showing original contributions to astronomical tables, legal reasoning, and historical methodology, demonstrated that Timbuktu's scholars were not mere copiers or preservers but active participants in knowledge production who synthesized diverse influences while maintaining distinctive scholarly voices.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that pre-colonial Timbuktu functioned as a vibrant center of scholarly production characterized by sophisticated engagement with transnational Islamic intellectual networks, substantial output across diverse knowledge domains, and systematic knowledge building that challenges colonial and postcolonial narratives marginalizing African contributions to global intellectual history. The analysis of 450 manuscripts revealed dominance of Islamic jurisprudence alongside significant scientific, historical, and philosophical scholarship, with citation patterns and network analysis establishing that Timbuktu's scholars maintained extensive connections spanning North Africa, the Middle East, and Al-Andalus while contributing original interpretations and syntheses that circulated beyond West Africa. Statistical modeling identified subject matter, temporal period, and scholarly mobility as significant predictors of transnational engagement, with historical and scientific works exhibiting particularly cosmopolitan orientations that required authors to position local knowledge production within broader scholarly debates. The findings critically disrupted Eurocentric epistemologies that have positioned Africa as peripheral to global knowledge production, revealing instead patterns of intellectual exchange, methodological rigor, and cumulative scholarship comparable to contemporary centers in Cairo, Fez, and Baghdad. However, the research also illuminated how colonial disruptions and postcolonial marginalization have fragmented understanding of this intellectual heritage, with contemporary preservation efforts constrained by inadequate resources, political instability, and persistent devaluation of African knowledge systems within global academic hierarchies. Reclaiming Timbuktu's scholarly legacy requires not merely documenting historical achievements but fundamentally restructuring contemporary knowledge production to center African epistemologies, support indigenous preservation initiatives, and recognize pre-colonial intellectual traditions as living resources for addressing contemporary challenges rather than museumified artifacts of a lost past.

Recommendations

Establish Transnational Digital Infrastructure for Manuscript Access and Collaborative Research: International funding agencies, African governments, and academic institutions should prioritize investment in comprehensive digitization of Timbuktu's manuscript collections with open-access platforms that enable global scholarly engagement while maintaining community ownership and interpretive authority. This infrastructure should incorporate multilingual interfaces, support collaborative annotation by scholars from diverse epistemological traditions, and establish protocols ensuring that knowledge generated from these sources benefits local communities rather than extractively serving external research agendas. Furthermore, digital preservation must be coupled with physical conservation support for manuscript custodians in Mali, recognizing that digitization complements rather than replaces the cultural significance of material manuscripts within communities that have safeguarded them across generations.

Integrate Pre-Colonial African Scholarship into Global Intellectual History Curricula: Educational institutions across Africa and globally should fundamentally revise curricula in history of science, philosophy, law, and Islamic studies to position Timbuktu and other African scholarly centers as integral rather than supplementary to narratives of human intellectual development. This curricular transformation requires developing pedagogical materials that move beyond token inclusion toward substantive engagement with African scholarly methodologies, training educators in decolonized historiography, and creating institutional incentives for research on African intellectual traditions. Universities in Mali and West Africa should receive targeted support to establish research centers specializing in pre-colonial scholarship that can lead global conversations about these traditions while training new generations of scholars equipped to interpret manuscripts within culturally grounded frameworks.

Develop Community-Centered Heritage Preservation Models That Balance Academic Research with Local Knowledge Systems: Preservation and interpretation of Timbuktu's manuscript heritage must be guided by frameworks that recognize manuscript custodians and local communities as primary stakeholders whose epistemologies and interests take precedence over external scholarly agendas. This requires establishing collaborative research protocols that ensure informed consent, equitable benefit-sharing, and community authority over how manuscripts are studied and represented, while supporting economic sustainability for families who have preserved collections often at great personal cost. Policy interventions should include legal frameworks protecting manuscript collections from illicit trafficking, funding mechanisms that compensate custodians for preservation labor, and institutional structures enabling communities to shape research priorities rather than serving as passive data sources for external scholars.

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