

New building opened at Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu

TIMBUKTU: South African President Kgalema Motlanthe has described the new building at the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu, Mali as a celebration of African co-operation and friendship.

"It is our commitment to a common humanity," the president said during the handing over of the building, which will be used to house the Timbuktu manuscripts, on Saturday, 24 January 2009.

President Motlanthe said he was confident that inspired by these manuscripts of great scholarship, African scholars will take up the cudgels and seek to re-define the role of Africa in history.

He said the event was not only imperative as one of the many cultural icons of our continent but seminal in their work to make the 21st century the African century.

"This magnificent heritage should strengthen our efforts to rebuild our continent, work for growth and development, fully aware that we can - despite the many impediments we face - emulate the grandeur of these great Africans who came before us.

"Significantly, it is part of our efforts to elevate Africa not only in the eyes of the world but also in the eyes of Africans who may have succumbed to the notion of Africa's historical inferiority or who carry a demeanour of defeat, or who join the ranks of the Afro-pessimists who see no value in Africa's past and hence no reason to contribute to Africa's future," he said.

He said the African intellectual diaspora, who add value to the academies including the institutions, governments, foundations and the societies outside of Africa must not be seen nor should they see themselves as aberrations of African history, but as products of this great intellectual tradition.

"Today we are displaying that not only do we have a rich tradition of oral communication, but have a rich heritage of reading and writing of literacy and literature as contained in these manuscripts," he said, adding that the manuscripts reflected a sophisticated literary culture.

He noted that while many of them are Islamic religious texts, they expand into the natural sciences, mathematics, astronomy, social sciences, political and economic history and the body of laws that govern the time.

"The texts speak of taxation systems, medical procedures, legal interpretations and observations, which allowed humanity a glimpse into the cosmos.

"The script of the texts is Arabic, but the languages incorporate local African languages like Hausa, Songh and Fulfulde, once again demonstrating Africa's capacity for literacy and a literary tradition," President Motlanthe said

He further noted that Timbuktu was symbolic, not of a narrow Islamic or African civilisation, but of a civilisation that was the synthesis of what knowledge was available in the world then.

"More importantly, it was part of Africa's contribution to the foundation of today's civilisation," he said.

He however said, the challenge was beyond the brick and mortar of a building, but about harnessing Timbuktu for the African Renaissance strive by people.

The bilateral agreement between Mali and South Africa is underpinned by the principles of keeping the legacy in Timbuktu and inviting the world to Timbuktu to see and study them.

The agreement also ensures that the people of Mali themselves are empowered to preserve and conserve this heritage and ensure that the manuscripts were not a monument to colonial prowess, but to African achievement.

It further provides the conservation of the manuscripts and the training of Malian archivists and curators.

It also so focuses on raising public awareness about the content of the manuscripts by way of research collaborations, academic conferences, publications and media coverage.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has declared Timbuktu a World Heritage Site, the New Partnership for Africa's Development NEPAD has declared the conservation of the Timbuktu manuscripts its first cultural project.

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