

## Ahmed Baba: Malian Scholar

What was going on in West Africa in the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Your first thoughts might be the arrival of Europeans or the early era of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. What you probably don't think of is an era of very prolific writers and scholars – but Ahmed Baba was just that.

This wasn't just limited to one person; Baba's talents ran in the family. His father, Ahmad bin al-Hajj Ahmad bin Umar bin Muhammed Aqit was also a noted scholar. When Baba was born in October 1556, it was obvious that this son would follow in his father's footsteps. He was still young when his family moved from its hometown of Araouane to Timbuktu in modern Mali, which was then the hub of West African scholarship. It was there that Baba began his very rigorous studies under his father and several other notable scholars in the city.

Not only was Ahmed Baba the author of over 40 books and various works – ranging from biographies to commentaries – he was also the last chancellor of the University of Sankore. The institution, located in Timbuktu, was the jewel in the crown of the city's scholastic achievements. Baba, like many scholars, naturally spent as much (if not more) of his time reading as he did writing, and his personal library consisted of over 1,600 different volumes which, unfortunately, would be lost after Baba was forced out of Timbuktu and his position at the University. This was subsequent to his being accused of subversion by the Moroccan conquerors that had invaded his land in 1594.

Though Baba fled Timbuktu, he was eventually captured in the city of Marrakush and imprisoned for two years, after which he was fortunate to come under a less severe form of detainment. He was taken to Morocco, where he was kept at the pleasure of the Sultan for a number of years. During this period, he taught in a respected Moroccan institute of learning and even the established scholars of the region came in droves to listen to him speak. Baba also wrote two of his most renowned works while in Morocco, the *Nail al-ibtihaj* and its abridgement.

Baba's works were virtually praised universally by his contemporaries – a feat not easily accomplished in the scholarly world, even over four centuries ago. Unfortunately, in addition to his personal library, many of Baba's works have been lost since he died in 1627. What works

have survived, however, have given countless researchers crucial insight into the lives of other notable figures, as many of Baba's works were biographical accounts of his contemporaries.

One of the more curious things about Baba's history is the relative lack of information about him. For a man who wrote over 40 books in a period when scholarly pursuits in Africa were relatively limited in scope, information about him is sparse and comes largely in the form of citations in accounts of other people. His most important contribution, however, is to the history of pre-colonial African scholars that so often goes ignored.

-- Philip U. Effiong

## References & Further Reading

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