

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper was to trace the historical background of Distance Education (DE) in West Africa and to examine the challenges. The history of DE in West Africa can be traced back to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.

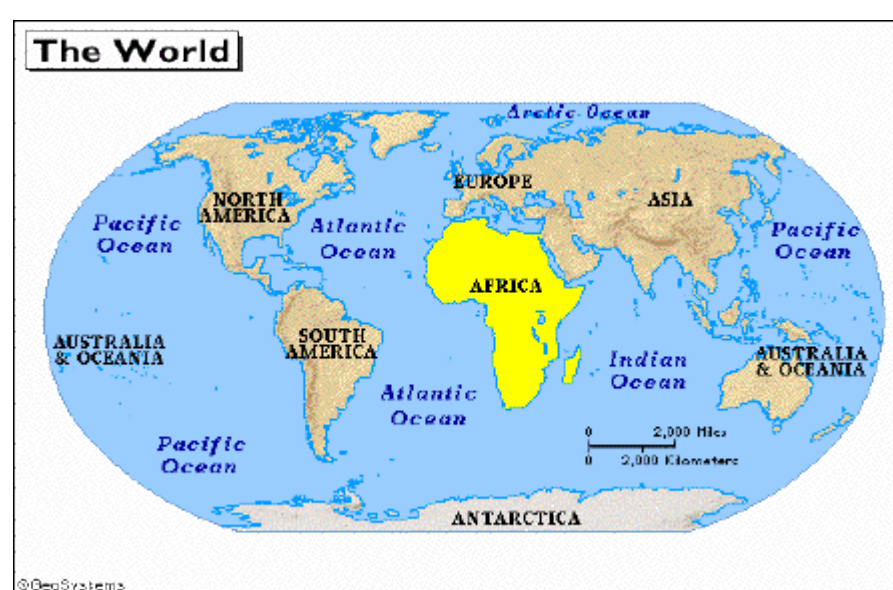
The Timbuktu scholarship started as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> Century and included jurisprudence, Islamic education as well as grammar (Saad, 1983). It also included Astronomy, Government, Philosophy and Ethics.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, the challenges of DE was the danger of attack from bandits, the attack from hostile empires, the rigorous hand copying of hundreds of thousands of manuscripts and the extended months it took for learning materials to arrive. Today, the challenges of distance education in West Africa are the prohibitive cost of hardware, the lack of technical support and the language factor.

## Purpose of Paper

- 1.) To examine the role of 12<sup>th</sup> Century Timbuktu scholarship in distance education. in West Africa
- 2.) To examine the role of misrepresentations in the history of DE in West Africa
- 3.) To identify the challenges of DE in West Africa and to make recommendations

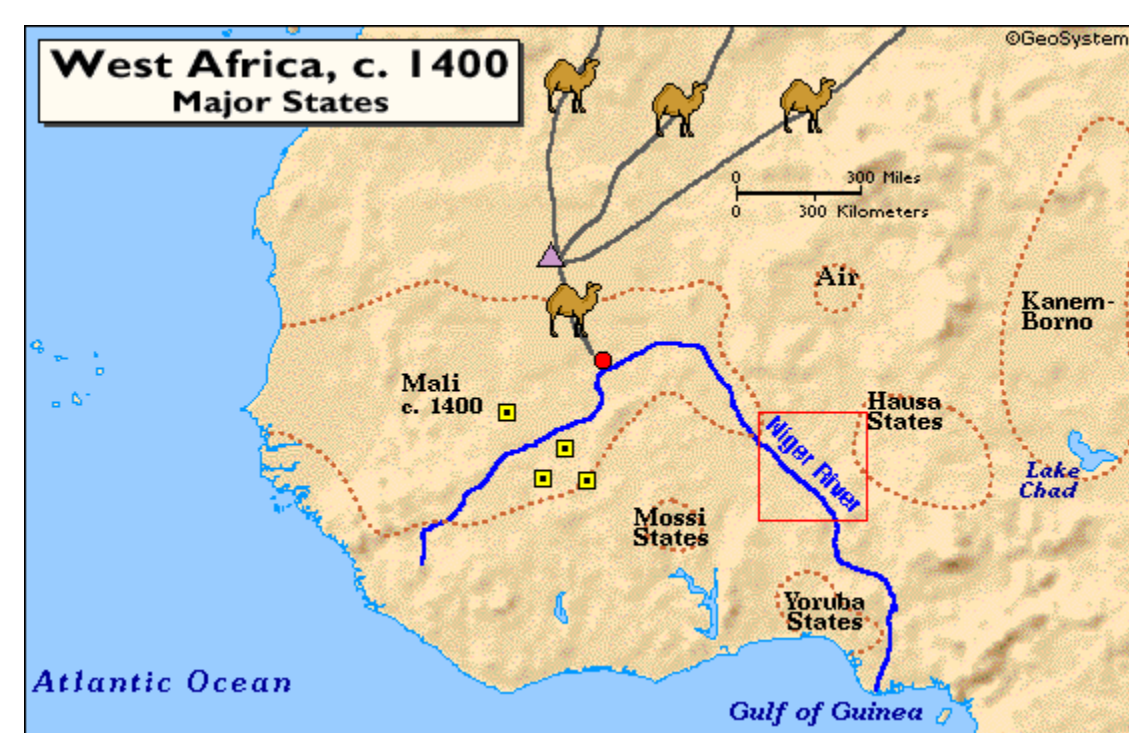
## Historical Background of Distance Education in West Africa



Map of the World

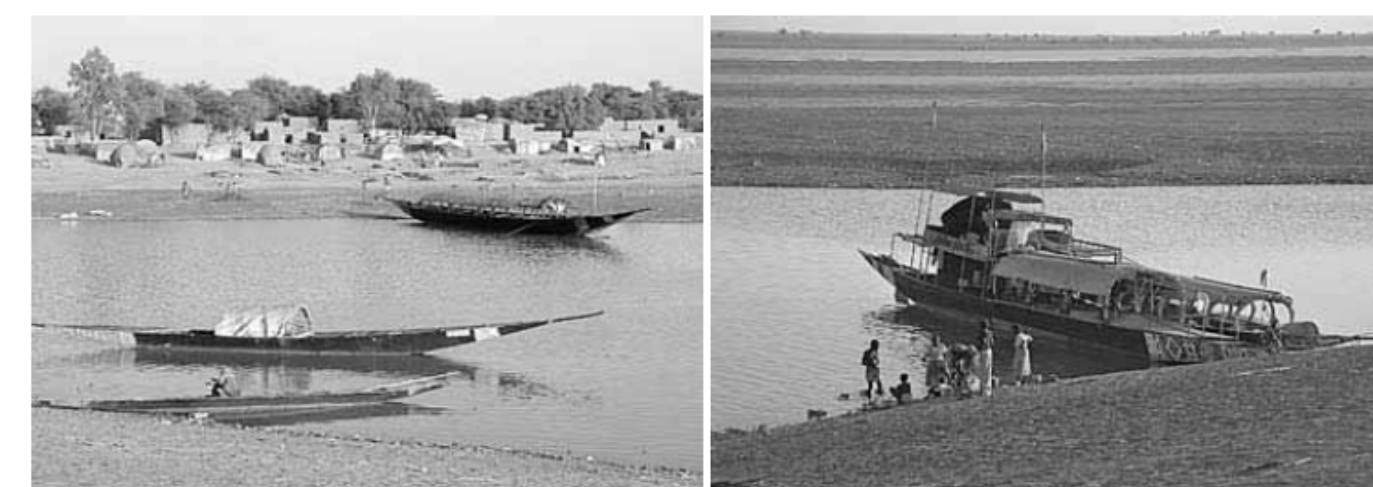
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Timbuktu is located in present day Mali in West Africa. It is located at the point where the Great River Niger flows northward into the Sahara Desert. Due to this strategic location, travelers coming from the North, mainly Arabs stopped at Timbuktu and traders bringing gold from the south, present day Ghana and Nigeria stopped at Timbuktu. Books from scholars between Northern Africa and Western Africa were also traded.



Map of 14<sup>th</sup> Century West Africa

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Timbuktu is located at the point where River Niger meets the North. This makes it a strategic trade route between West and North Africa. Retrieved from [http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/The\\_Meanings\\_of\\_Timbuktu\\_-\\_Chapter\\_1\\_-\\_Re\\_discovering\\_Timbuktu.pdf](http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/The_Meanings_of_Timbuktu_-_Chapter_1_-_Re_discovering_Timbuktu.pdf)

Leo Africanus, was a traveler, an Arab diplomat, and an historian of the XVIth century. He wrote about Timbuktu: *"There are many judges, doctors and clerics here, all receiving good salaries from King Askia Mohammed of the State of Songhay. He pays great respect to men of learning. There is a great demand for books, and more profit is made from the trade in books than from any other line of business."* [History of Timbuktu, <http://www.timbuktufoundation.org/history.html>]



Trade routes of the Western Sahara 1000-1500. Goldfields have light brown shading. Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oualata>



Gate to the Gidan Rumfa in Kano, Northern Nigeria originally built in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Students came from as far as Kano, Nigeria. Retrieved from Google Images.

## Review of Literature

Beyond Timbuktu, very few people are aware of the Timbuktu scholarship that existed before the European era. Popular sayings like "As far as Timbuktu" have unconsciously framed in the minds of people on the other side of the continent that Timbuktu is either a myth or a far away place in the desert. Historians have wrongly concluded that Africa has no written tradition; that they have only oral history. More recently, this misconception was proved to be wrong by the discovery of the manuscripts of Ahmed Baba in Timbuktu. As recently as 1963, a famous British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said: **"Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness."** [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning\\_history/1492/1492\\_timbuktu.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/1492/1492_timbuktu.cfm)

Hegel (1770-1831) was a German philosopher who concluded that West Africa had no history before the colonization of Africa by Europe. His writings influenced many scholars who wrongly concluded that West Africa did not have any relevance in history before the colonization of Africa. After Hegel, there was the ethnological paradigm where historians were influenced by the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939) a French scholar whose published work titled "How Natives Think" influenced future historians to think that West Africans could not think logically as their European counterparts. By the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, three universities already existed in Timbuktu.

**Sankore University /University of Timbuktu-** The levels of study graduated from a primary level (mastery of the Arabic Language and the memorization of the Quran), a secondary level (mastery of trade school and business ethics. The subjects studied included grammar, mathematics, geography, history, physics, astronomy, chemistry alongside more advanced learning of the Qu'ran). A third level answered religious and philosophical questions that were debatable and moved to a fourth level. At the fourth level they were made judges or professors. In all, it would take up to ten years to go through the primary to the fourth level. Over 700,000 manuscripts were discovered at the site of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Sankore University.

These manuscripts contained material comparable to philosophical questions entertained by the likes of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus (Diagne, 2012; The Library of Congress, 2012). The topics covered in the manuscripts range from Medicine, law, ethics, Islam and everyday living. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mali/mali-exhibit.html> The other universities were Jingaray Ber University and Sidi Yahya University.



The Sankore Mosque was home to Timbuktu's international university in the 16<sup>th</sup> century

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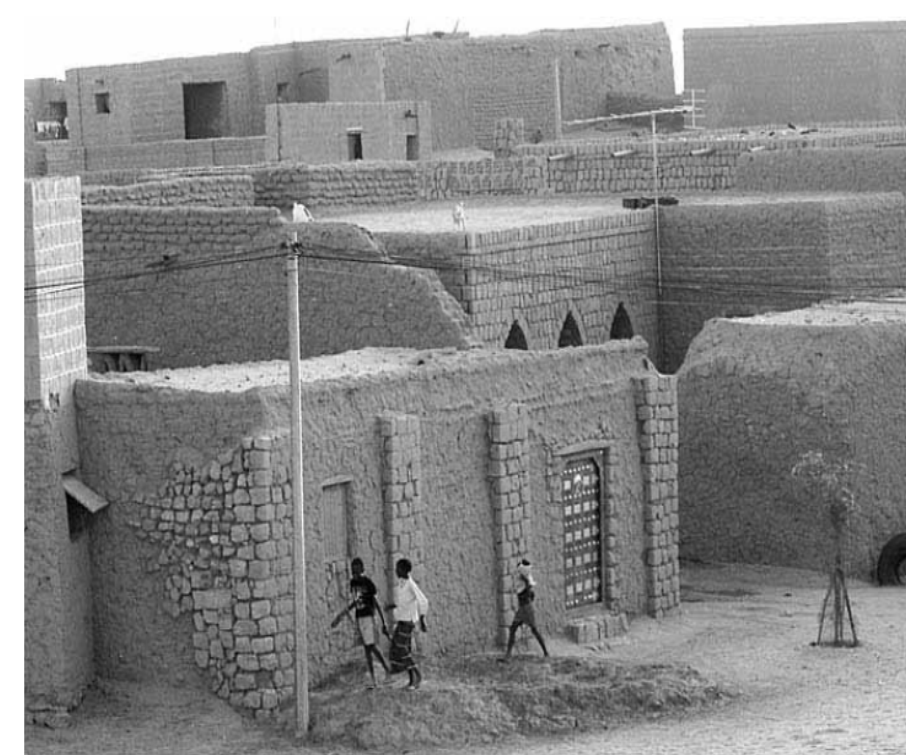


River Niger is shown in Blue. The strategic location of Timbuktu by the Northern point of the River Niger, afforded an enviable position of trade between North and West Africa.



Manuscripts in the Ahmed Baba Center in Timbuktu. More than 25 books written by Ahmed Baba have been recovered.

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The mud brick buildings of Timbuktu built on foundations built between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Retrieved from [http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/The\\_Meanings\\_of\\_Timbuktu\\_-\\_Chapter\\_1\\_-\\_Re\\_discovering\\_Timbuktu.pdf](http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/The_Meanings_of_Timbuktu_-_Chapter_1_-_Re_discovering_Timbuktu.pdf)

## Challenges and Recommendations

- 1.) Today, many West African countries offer distance education and they face common problems. While they are no longer faced with laborious hand copying of materials, the West African countries are faced with the prohibitive cost of hardware, the use of a common language, the reliance on foreign aid and lack of technical support.
- 2.) The education of nomadic children through mobile learning should be strengthened.
- 3.) The universities should not totally rely on the internet for DE. They should consolidate using the postal system, the television, radio, text messages and meeting face to face for very short periods in the semester.