

# Youth Talk



Hamilton Naki was employed as a gardener by Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. Soon, his dissecting skills used on lab animals in medical experiments, brought him to the attention of Dr. Christian Barnard. Naki took an active part in the celebrated successful human heart transplant which made Dr. Barnard an international celebrity in 1967. 78 year old Naki is only belatedly receiving international recognition. A TV documentary, *Hands Of A Forgotten Hero*, is in the works. But despite his achievements within the medical field, Naki been living on a pension of a gardener since retiring in 1991.

Yes, I knew that God is there, and the truth will one day come out. As the bible says: "Nothing done in the dark will not be revealed". At the end, the truth always comes out.

*How would you describe your life at the time Dr. Barnard was getting all the credit for the work you were involved in?*  
At that time I was like a slave, I couldn't say or do anything against their will. That's the way it had to be.

*See that you are a fan of Nelson Mandela — have you ever met him?*  
Yes. On the 10th of December 2002 I was awarded a National Order of Mapungubwe. That is the highest honour in South Africa, and it's given by the President himself. That is how I met him.

*What advice would you give to those individuals who are trying to do something with their lives, like you - a real hero?*  
I would advise them to be patient. One day their dreams would also come true. To the youth: education is the key to a brighter future.

Last October he became the first recipient of BTWSC's Black S/Heroes Award. He received a recognition certificate and £1000. The story led to several web publications, a three page feature in the Jan. 2004 edition of *New African* magazine, which has led to a group of South African doctors planning to honour him. **Louise Longa** had a few questions for the hitherto unsung hero.

*Did you think the truth would one day come out?*

highlight the fact that slavery damaged Africa as a lot of experienced and skilled people were taken away. European history even tries to shift the blame for slavery by saying that the slave trade was already going on in Africa. But European history can't hide the fact that Timbuktu was a great city, and without it, we might not have universities today.

Black people are often treated as inferior to whites, and they are told that they would not be living in a civilised environment if they were not for Europeans. This often makes them believe they are in fact inferior to Europeans. This means many blacks believe that white people are superior to them and that they should be in subordinate positions. So many of them don't aim to be in highly ranked positions i.e. manager, doctor, lawyer, etc. But instead, settle for being cleaners, although they have the potential to do something much greater.

Black youth were aware of their roots and Timbuktu, many who believe they are inferior to white people may change their view and realise that the perception that Africa is a backward continent, and has had no part in making education what it is today, is not fact but fiction. *Rachel Twumasi*

## The Relevance Of Timbuktu To The Black Youth Of Britain In 2003: The Competition Results & Additional Pieces\*

\* As a follow on from the Black History Month, we asked young people aged 13-19 to enter a competition entitled 'The Relevance Of Timbuktu To The Black Youth Of Britain In 2003'. We also asked one adult, Dr Morgan Dalphinis, and a young person, Heather, to contribute contrasting pieces. The full text of some of the pieces can be found on [www.btwsc.com](http://www.btwsc.com).

Myths are a congruous part of all civilizations - the Greeks and Romans even shared theirs (Herakles and Hercules, Zeus and Jupiter). Myths are the epitome of 'family entertainment', acting on levels that serve to interest all generations. In essence, they may be purely stories and tales, but their significance is further reaching. They delineate the psychology, customs and ideals of society. Although myths are built upon a foundation of fabrication and rumour, their maxims are often unanimous. This suggests that there may be truth in the underlying knowledge they seek to pass on. Modern myths, however, are very different. Some are so truth deficient, that they actually aim to deceive. The 'Timbuktu myth' is a quintessential example.

In modern language, the word Timbuktu has connotations of remoteness and great distance. The other facet of this myth is that the various imperial powers introduced civilisation to the backward inhabitants of the country of Africa (sic). According to this mindset, the rape of resources that accompanied colonial expansion were merely a privilege of superiority. The truth, however, is very different.

Timbuktu, in central Mali, was connected to the Niger River by a network of sophisticated canals. Founded in the 11th century, it became a major trading centre and prospered from the trans-Saharan trade routes (primarily for gold and salt). Building upon economic prosperity, Timbuktu quickly became an internationally renowned centre of academic excellence, and a centre for the propagation of Islam. From 1438, Timbuktu developed under the Askia dynasty of al-Hajji Mohamed. Mohamed's reverence for Islam, and support of scholarship steered the city to its peak. Leo Africanus (a famous traveller) produced a classic account in 1510:

"The King at his own expense liberally maintaineth here great numbers of doctors, judges, priests and other learned men. There are manuscripts or written books, brought hither out of Barbary, which are sold for more money than any other merchandise. Instead of money they use bars of Gold." [i]

Mohamed built upon Timbuktu's previous economic and academic success, to make it one of the most organised states in the world. The policy of copying the manuscripts of all visiting

travellers (scholars and merchants) expanded the libraries to unparalleled volume, attracting scholars from across west Africa and even as far as Saudi Arabia. French historian Felix Dubois wrote about the remarkable achievements of the city:

"The scholars of Timbuktoo yielded in nothing, to the saints in the sojourns in the foreign universities of Fez, Tunis, and Cairo. They as-tounded the most learned men of Islam by their erudition. That these Negroes were on a level with the Arabian savants is proved by the fact that they were installed as professors in Morocco and Egypt. In contrast to this, we find that Arabs were not always equal." [ii]

Although it was sacked in 1593 by invaders from Morocco, Timbuktu 'was an economic and cultural capital equal in historical importance to acclaimed cities like Rome, Athens, Jerusalem, and Mecca.' [iii] Due to the 'desertification' that has beset the region, the prestigious Koranic Sankore University and other buildings for teaching Islamic law are a pallid reflection of their former temporal radiance. However, Timbuktu's amaranthine qualities lie in the many lessons its existence can teach the world.

The most apparent lesson is that any suggestion of the inferiority of the black (or any other race) youth of Britain is false. Even in apartheid South Africa, a black man played a major role in the first human heart transplant in 1967, albeit in secret.

Furthermore, in-depth study of Timbuktu may reveal valuable truisms relevant to all aspects of running a state. However, Timbuktu's paramount lesson is remarkably the most relevant to the youth of today. Through education and erudition, knowledge can be obtained. Timbuktu illustrates that acquisition of knowledge generates great wealth, and knowledge empowers the individual and the state.

[i] The classic account of Timbuktoo by Leo Africanus (Francis Moore's translation of 1738). <http://www.manntaylor.com/timbuctoo.html>

[ii] Dubois, Felix. *Timbuktoo the Mysterious*. (London: W. Heinemann, 1897), p. 285. <http://www.historychannel.com/classroomlines.co.uk/timbuktu.html>

[iii] <http://www.historychannel.com/classroomlines.co.uk/timbuktu.html>

Many of you must be wondering what the name Timbuktu stands for and why many people find the name to be mysterious. As an Afro-Caribbean, I had not been educated much on such an important aspect of my history, but learnt a great deal on the other aspects such as slavery. I had heard many a time of the name Timbuktu, but it had no meaning to me - just a place very far away that was associated with legends and myths.

But, Timbuktu is in fact real and is located in Mali, West Africa and was famous for its wealth and for being the centre of learning.

Black youth in Britain today should be educated more about their history, so they can pass the knowledge down to the next generation. It shouldn't be mentioned once a year specifically during the time of black history month, but in history classes at school.

At this moment you are wondering what Timbuktu has to do with today's youth. Being a black youth myself, I think it is important to know one's history, mine being the African history. I was told that at the time when African scholarships were developing, people in Britain, at that period, were basically living in caves. The notion of the university in Timbuktu was not known in Europe.

Education in Britain is a very big issue, especially for our black youth. There are many who underachieve at GCSE or A-Level, especially in maths and English. But we shouldn't forget those who achieve the grades to attend their chosen University and some reaching as far as Cambridge. The knowledge of Timbuktu can be a motivational tool for use by educational institutes to better equip us with a positive or new light about learning and education.

There is a greater chance that people will associate Africa with slavery and poverty, rather than with Timbuktu and its history. We should acknowledge that prestigious education developed in Africa long before Britain came to build one. Today, although there are many prominent Universities here in Britain and not so many in Africa, it still stands that our mother country had an intellectual city with historical purpose and is now a heritage landmark. Timbuktu has a historical significance as far as learning is concerned. *Heather Peter*

*Riverboats coming from the south and camels from the north, wisdom and knowledge reside in Timbuktu* – A Timbuktu proverb.

### Timbuktu Background

The historical relevance of Timbuktu to black youth in Britain is that it is the place where our ancestors came from – it was part of one of the two previous great empires, which were Ghana and Mali... Research into your ancestors and learn about them. Learn from the first people who inhabited the globe, and realise the wonderful knowledge that the first man was created in God's image.

About 1100 AD, a group of nomads called Tuaregs, who grazed their herds during the dry season on the banks of the Niger River, discovered an oasis a short distance away from the river and decided to establish a permanent camp of tents there. The Arabs named the original inhabitants of Timbuktu the Tuaregs, as they were not easily converted to Islam.

While they were away tending their herds, they left the settlement in the care of a woman. One version says her name was Tomboutou, meaning 'the mother with the large navel', while still another tale says her name was Boutou, and that Tom means 'belonging to'.

Whatever the circumstances, the name of the settlement came from a woman. The Tuaregs showed great respect to their women, which is the reason why the name Timbuktu came from a woman.

Timbuktu's famous university, Sankore, attracted scholars and students from all over the Muslim world. Scholars trained in Mecca or Cairo came to teach in Timbuktu. *Darrien Blackwood*

**Timbuktu was the first place to have a university. What that means to me is that people aged 18 or older can be educated, and get a good job to feed themselves and their families.**

**Timbuktu, or Tombouctou, means, "Well that is owed to a woman called named Bouctou." Bouctou is a word that means bellybutton or navel. Timbuktu was the meeting place for tradesmen who would travel across Africa to trade. Because Timbuktu is so remote, and so desolate, and incredibly difficult to get to - not just because of the terrain and heat (110 degrees is uncommon), but because of the bandits - rumours spread about the city. Anne-Marie, 9%**

### Timbuktu

There were three main West African empires, Ghana, Mali and Songhai. The ancient empire of Ghana was not in the area of present Ghana, but further west of that. That was taken over by Mali, the next largest empire. The third and largest empire of west Africa was Songhai. Within the periods of Mali and Songhai, there thrived centres of learning in the west coast of Africa, Timbuktu, Gao and Jende. Within those areas, African scholarship developed right up to university level. At that period in Britain, people were basically still dwelling in caves, and dressing in animal skin. The notion of the university had not been known in Europe. That was later taken up from Africa and brought by the Moors to Spain, and from Spain to the South of France and then further into Europe. So, Timbuktu has got a historical significance as far as learning

is concerned. Timbuktu, however also represents a period in time where west African scholarship and trade, particularly the trade in gold, flourished.

So within that period, you've got a notion of West Africa that is economically powerful, and at the same time which has scholarship that other people did not have. This brought jealousies and competition. Some of the major competitors were Berbers, Moors and Arabs. The Berbers, particularly those in Morocco eventually invaded Timbuktu and the African empires. One of the first things they did was to take the scholars, put them in chains and bring to their own countries.

The reason is - whoever controls the human mind will control the universe. So if you invade and take something valuable like the scholars, you will try and use them for

your own interests. So Timbuktu marks a kind of apex as well as the fall of a particular development of west Africa. So the issue is that is the past, and how is this relevant to black youth of 2003? Is this totally irrelevant? The youth may have decided that life has got nothing to do with learning, there's no need to make the effort - after all, they know their place and are content to do nothing. They are content to have no goals. However, Timbuktu may be a lesson that in order to destroy the body, the first thing to do is to paralyse the mind. Black youth are talking about lyrics which are violent or anti-women. What is the cause? They need to realise how important the mind and learning is. Their forebears in places like Timbuktu realised that many centuries ago.

*Dr. Morgan Dalphinis*  
Head of early learning at Newham College