The Ink of the Scholars
This book is a translation of Souleymane Bachir Diagne's *L'encre des savants : réflexions sur la philosophie en Afrique* published in 2013 by CODESRIA (Dakar) and Présence Africaine Éditions (Paris).
The Ink of the Scholars

Reflections on Philosophy in Africa

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

Translated from French by
Jonathan Adjemian

Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
DAKAR
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ......................................................................................................................... 1

**The Force of Living** .............................................................................................................. 9
  - Bantu Philosophy: A Contradictory Text ............................................................. 9
  - Ontology of Living Force ............................................................................. 18
  - Languages and Translation .................................................................. 21
  - Proof by Aesthetics ................................................................................. 30

**The Time we Need** .............................................................................................................. 35
  - That Time we Call African ................................................................. 37
  - Words to Speak of Time .................................................................... 41
  - To Foresee or to Anticipate .............................................................. 44

**Speech and Ink** .................................................................................................................... 49
  - Sense of Urgency and the Passage to Writing ............................................ 49
  - Philosophy and Orality ........................................................................ 53
  - Meanings of Timbuktu .......................................................................... 56

**Socialisms and Democracy** .................................................................................................. 61
  - The African Path to Socialism According to Nyerere ..................... 63
  - Socialism, Consciencism, Spiritualism and Secularism ................ 65
  - Senghor and Humanist Socialism ....................................................... 69
  - The Democratic Turn and the African Charter on Human
    and People’s Rights ........................................................................ 72

**Conclusion: Lessons from the African Charter on Human
and Peoples’ Rights** ........................................................................................................... 79

**Notes** ..................................................................................................................................... 83

**Bibliography** .......................................................................................................................... 101
Preface

“The Ink of the Scholars is more precious than the blood of the martyrs” is a saying from Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that gives its title to this book. Ahmad Bâba, arguably the most famous scholar from Timbuktu, quotes that statement and makes it the heart of his work *On the Merits of Scholars*, a reflection on the importance of the pursuit and the transmission of knowledge. Such a title can certainly serve as an emblem for his hometown, as Timbuktu was, historically, an intellectual beacon, an important center of learning and written erudition.

So the title “the Ink of the Scholars”, being a reference to a work on *The Merits of Scholars* by a scholar from Timbuktu is meant to shift the focus from the usual discussion about orality and oral tradition to the consideration of a tradition of written erudition which is very important, still to be studied further, and an integral part of the reflection on philosophy in Africa.

But of course this title plays another crucial role given the current context prevailing in certain regions of Africa, in particular in northern Mali, where Timbuktu came under attack from terrorist groups who loathe what the old monuments and the ancient manuscripts in that city stand for: the love for humanity and its creations, the spirit of tolerance that comes with knowledge and wisdom. At a time when terrorists attack institutions of learning and express hatred for education and the pursuit of a knowledge they absurdly call “western”, it may be useful to recall that the very religion in the name of which they pretend to be allowed to take so many innocent lives with their own proclaims loud and clear that the only combat that can be deemed holy is the one for the enlightenment of knowledge, for the appropriation of the word of wisdom whatever its origin: the ink of the scholars is more precious than the blood of the martyrs.
Acknowledgements

This English translation of the original text in French was sponsored by the Institute of African Studies at Columbia. I thank its Director Mamadou Diouf for his continuous support. I also express my gratitude to Jinny Prais, the Deputy Director of the Institute, and to Jonathan Adjemian who first translated part of the text as a reading for one of his classes before offering to complete the work. Ebrima Sall, the Executive Secretary of CODESRIA is the one who asked me to write these “Reflections on Philosophy in Africa”. I am grateful to him for the great support I received from CODESRIA and from him personally.