

The Timbuktu manuscripts: a model for preservation in Africa

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Abstract:

Timbuktu's literary patrimony has survived the ravages of mankind and environmental threats since time immemorial and this coupled by the fact that the manuscripts are a veritable treasure trove of knowledge explains why the interest has been phenomenal on the global stage. This "tin-trunk literacy" once in official depositories is now finding its way into the basements of individual households where it had previously been housed for centuries. The cycle of archiving and re-archiving at private or personal level as evidenced in Mali points to the need to depoliticise the archive. The fact that the Timbuktu manuscripts have survived for centuries in those household basements, in storerooms and garages for example, is a strong African archival tradition that deserves special commendation considering that modern archives are mainly Western in conception. The lesson for Africa is that natural ventilation remains the best solution to preserve our collections and in the construction of future archival buildings this needs to be observed to avoid artificial methods of preservation which are unsustainable. International collaboration efforts whilst welcome, should take cognisance of this strong archival tradition when planning rescue efforts with regards to infrastructure. Another fundamental lesson is that Africans should be able to take control of the digitization of their own intellectual heritage to counter cultural pillaging. On the other hand, the efforts made by the South African Government to preserve this Timbuktu heritage are applaudable but the deplorable state of its archives at private, state and provincial levels raises eyebrows as it appears this was political expediency with the so-called African Renaissance concept.

Keywords:

Preservation, Timbuktu manuscripts, archival building, Dead Sea Scrolls, digitization

Introduction

According to Aluka (2000-2010), the Timbuktu Manuscripts Collection offers an unparalleled window into societies and intellectual traditions of the Western Sudan from the late 15th century onward. The manuscripts are now under grave threat from a variety of sources, both natural and human. Starting in 2005, Aluka began to collaborate with partner organisations in Mali, South Africa, and the United States to digitize a selection of the manuscripts and make them available to an international scholarly audience and, at the same time, support critically important conservation and cataloguing efforts. With the release of this collection, the first of these manuscripts are now available in the digital library which is now under threat due to the harsh realities of conflict between the Tuareg rebels and the Islamists as evidenced by the bombings.

The manuscripts and their covers demonstrate a sophisticated visual and technical artistry and reflect a rich intellectual and scholarly tradition. They cover a diverse range of topics and genres, including the natural and physical sciences (astronomy, mathematics, botany, and medicine); the literary arts (poetic verse, panegyrics, grammar); the Islamic religious sciences such as theology (kalām), jurisprudence (fiqh), legal opinions (fatawa); and historical accounts (tarikh). Many of the manuscripts are written in local vernaculars (some of which are archaic forms of the present-day languages of Songhay, Tamasheq, and Fulfulde, among others) with Arabic script. Charts, diagrams, commentaries, and marginalia are plentiful; some recount complex genealogies and scientific theories, others record intellectual disagreements among scholars, teachers, and commentators (Aluka 2000-2010). Patel (2012) noted that they are a veritable treasure trove of human knowledge and an expert on Mali, Syson (2012; See also Jeppie 2008:15) further posited that:

What is so important about Timbuktu's literary patrimony is that it is a challenge to Western ideas that Africa is a land of song and dance and oral tradition. It reveals a continent with an immensely rich literary and scientific heritage.

Diallo (2012; See also Jeppie 2008:15) echoed similar sentiments and reiterated that:

Making a tabula rasa of Africa's intellectual history was one of the main components of the colonial enterprise. The erroneous assertion that Africans were intellectually inexistent before the advent of colonialism, just as a way of legitimizing the subjugation and enslavement of Africans should be discouraged.

It is this intellectual heritage that inspired the birth of the African Renaissance concept spearheaded by South Africa's Thabo Mbeki in 2001 that we now turn to in the next section.

The Mali-South Africa digitization project

The project collaborates with the Government of Mali and with other stakeholders and role-players in preserving, cataloguing and appropriately and securely housing the Malian documentary heritage at the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu. Specifically it is assisting with the conservation of the historic manuscripts of Timbuktu through the provision of training, technical support and assistance for the development of conservation facilities. In 2003, the South African Government, through the National Archives of the Department of Arts and Culture, instituted a training programme for Malian conservators and heritage professionals at appropriate South African institutions. This programme completed the second phase of a three-year internship programme to train conservators from the Ahmed Baba Institute in preservation and conservation repair. The final stages of the programme involved conservation and repair to the manuscripts (The South Africa Mali Project 2004).

The Government of South Africa provided strategic direction and capacity for the implementation of the SA-Mali Project through an Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC). The IMC was supported by a technical implementation team drawn from government officials in the Department of Arts and

Culture (DAC) and the Presidency. A project manager was appointed on contract by DAC (The South Africa Mali Project 2004).

Discussion

It is commendable that many collections have been digitized and that local scholars have been trained in how to interpret the literary treasures, most of which are family collections that have been handed down from generation to generation for centuries. Some scholars have rightly pointed out that Africans should be able to control the rate and nature of digitization of their own intellectual heritage and they should have access to these resources unhindered by external interests. Put bluntly, Africans should be able to set their own digitization agenda and thus counter cultural pillaging. South Africa has thrown its weight behind efforts to preserve the priceless Timbuktu manuscripts and the investment in infrastructure and human resources towards this are vast.

The new facility built with South African help at an estimated cost of between R50-million and R60-million, boasts an archive capable of housing 30,000 manuscripts in the Institute's collection, with temperature and humidity controls necessary to provide the correct conditions for preserving the manuscripts. The building also comprises a conservation laboratory, an auditorium, an outdoor amphitheatre, a public library, and administrative offices (Big Media Publishers 2009).

This South Africa-Mali Manuscript Project is the first official cultural project of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Africa needs more of these partnerships though some critics have argued that this is some form of disguised South African imperialism in the continent, a viewpoint which reignites the debate on the politics of information imperialism. The North-South divide or unequal exchange in this instance has interesting ideological ramifications.

Be that as it may, the fact that the cycle of archiving and re-archiving at the private or personal level as evidenced in Mali points to the need to depoliticise the archive. The fact that the Timbuktu manuscripts have survived for centuries in those household basements, in storerooms and garages for example, is a strong African archival tradition that deserves special commendation considering that modern archives are mainly Western in conception as observed by Mazrui (1985). Cloonan (2007) rightly pointed out that the preservation of cultural heritage has been around for millennia, as illustrated by the biblical passage "take these evidences--- and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue for many days" (Jeremiah 32:14).

This tradition of archiving spans centuries which cannot be eliminated by the stroke of the pen, hence the need to decolonise the mind that these state of the art official repositories are the panacea to preservation problems. It has been argued that archival buildings play a critical role in the management of records and archives, and it has been pointed that buildings are the first line of defence against extreme climates and various disasters (Forde and Rhys-Lewis 2007). The International Council on Archives (ICA 2005) noted that archive buildings cannot be "mass designed" in an attempt to make them valid for anywhere in the world. A survey done by Mnjama (2005) noted that a lack of adequate storage facilities is one of the major hindrances to the growth of archival services within sub-Saharan Africa. Controlling climate conditions, such as temperature and relative humidity has always posed challenges for archivists.

Installing heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems and monitoring the weather can aid in controlling the climate. However, an HVAC system is costly and remains unaffordable for most archival institutions within the sub-Saharan region, and Ngulube (2005) observed that the energy resources to keep an air-conditioning system running are prohibitive within the region. What this therefore means is that natural ventilation remains the most viable option for those building archival facilities. The Timbuktu manuscripts can be compared to the Dead Sea Scrolls as the constant arid climate of the Judean Desert and the stable humidity and temperature within the caves were likely the major factors contributing to the preservation of the manuscripts for two millennia. Due to this environment, Murambiwa (2013) remarked that:

. . . a lesson for those building archival facilities is to opt for natural ventilation. We have learnt that the hard way. Without air-conditioning, our facilities become furnaces and the long-term effect of inappropriate temperature and humidity levels is too ghastly to contemplate.

Apparently, the Dead Sea Scrolls, considered to be the greatest archaeological discovery of the twentieth century, survived for thousands of years in caves than out of the cave. It is well documented that removing the fragile Scrolls from their caves not only interrupted their environmental stability, but also subjected the Scrolls to damage through human handling. More research still needs to be done as to whether we can justify the digitization efforts to preserve this unique heritage. Apparently, digitization is not the panacea to preservation problems as it is not a proven preservation medium in view of media impermanence (Hunter 2000; Ngulube 2002) and this largely explains why archivists have a preference for microfilm.

On the other hand, South Africa will need to draw lessons from this project and to work at putting its own house in order, considering that its local archives are in a dire situation. Ngoepe (2011) observed that the country does not even have the infrastructure to harvest electronic records, and, if this is anything to go by, could the Timbuktu expedition be viewed as a spectacular example of misplaced priorities? This appears to be the case as the present state of archives in South Africa is symptomatic of a hemorrhage that was caused by this African Renaissance adventure, as well as other factors. Commenting on the paralysis presently prevailing with regards to the state of archives in South Africa, Ngoepe (2011) further noted from one pundit that:

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARS) is hampered by red tape and lack of funds. It is so dreadfully under-resourced and politically hamstrung that it can barely perform the simplest of its mandated duties.

Renowned historian Shula Marks (2012) reiterated similar sentiments and noted that:

It is therefore important that states have well-managed archives and it is disappointing that, at the moment, all the evidence suggests that conditions in South Africa's national and provincial archives are deteriorating alarmingly.

The foregoing remarks paint a sombre picture on the state of archives within South Africa and are emblematic of how politicised archives can become and this situation can be generalized to the majority of developing countries. The bottom line is that while ironically the national archive reflects the views of the powerful, the same archival institutions are consistently neglected by government. The lack of sufficient resources has been singled out as a major obstacle, in addition to the lack of political will and misplaced priorities. The Archival Platform (2014) state of the nation archives report noted that:

Documentary records are being lost. Public archives remain geared to paper-based realities. They lack the technical skills and infrastructure required to ingest and preserve electronic records or to harness the power of digitization in support of preservation and public access.

Whilst acknowledging that there were some pockets of excellence, the Archival Platform report (2014) pointed out that South Africa's archival system is in trouble as it is not delivering on key elements of its mandate despite the best efforts of practitioners. The need for the archives sector to get a grant as is happening to library services will indeed go a long way in enabling the system to deliver on the mandates set out in the 1996 Archives Act and provincial legislation (The Archival Platform 2014).

Conclusion

The Timbuktu manuscripts like the Dead Sea Scrolls have survived the ravages of the environment and mankind since time immemorial. Attempts to remove the manuscripts from their original habitation has subjected them to damage through human handling. The lesson for Africa is that natural ventilation remains the best solution to preserve our collections and in the construction of future archival buildings this needs to be observed to avoid artificial methods of preservation which are unsustainable. Natural ventilation explains why they have survived for so long and more research needs to be done to understand why this is so and whether we can prescribe digitization as a preservation strategy. Building state of the art archival facilities, while commendable, is not the solution to this preservation challenge as South Africa needs an introspection as to where its priorities lie with regards to its archival heritage.

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