

## **The project “Safeguarding the manuscripts of Timbuktu”: a synergic approach to the preservation of written cultural heritage**

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper presents the project “Safeguarding the manuscripts of Timbuktu” coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), University of Hamburg. The project was set up following the dramatic events of 2012 that led to the evacuation of many manuscript collections from Timbuktu to Bamako where the manuscripts have since suffered from environmental hazards and inappropriate storage. The paper discusses the project’s aims and methods, challenges and solutions, with a focus on the issues of preservation and accessibility for research. The collaborative approach that was adopted at different stages of the project is addressed by highlighting the importance of synergy between “operating” measures and educational initiatives both from Malian and international institutions.*

**Keywords:** Timbuktu manuscripts, preservation, cataloguing, research

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## Introduction

The Timbuktu manuscripts represent a cultural heritage of international importance, recognised by the scholarly community across the globe and by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. In March 2012 the manuscript collections were put at risk of destruction after the rebel groups overtook the city of Timbuktu. As an aftermath, many manuscripts from the collections of the Ahmed Baba Institute (IHERI-AB) were burnt. However, thanks to the rescue operation organized by the custodians of the Timbuktu libraries and assisted by several international organisations, most of the well-known collections were transported from Timbuktu to Bamako. The operation took more than seven months to have been completed, from June 2012 to January 2013. It was a massive effort fulfilled against the odds of wartime situation. About 300.000 manuscripts were transported from Timbuktu to Bamako in 2400 metal lockers, mostly by car, but also by donkeys or by canoes on the Niger river. Even the metal chests, normally used in Mali as containers for transporting all sorts of goods, have their own story. The number of the metal chests required for transportation of the manuscripts was so high that at some stage there became a shortage of them on the market and therefore some chests were made by local craftsmen from metal barrels.

Subsequently, the manuscripts were placed in improvised storage rooms in Bamako and since 2013 there have been several Malian and international initiatives devoted to the manuscripts' preservation, cataloguing and digitization.

## Characteristics of Timbuktu libraries and manuscripts

The Timbuktu manuscripts have predominantly been accumulated in private libraries.<sup>1</sup> These collections represent family heritage kept in the owners' houses. Some collections are more open for research than others. The NGO SAVAMA-DCI (Association pour la Sauvegarde et la Valorisation des Manuscrits pour la Défense de la Culture Islamique) plays a role as coordinator of about 30 private libraries and its Executive President, Abdel Kader Haidara, is himself director of one of the most important libraries in Timbuktu – the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library<sup>2</sup>. The Institute Ahmed Baba (IHERI-AB: Institut des Hautes Etudes et de Recherches Islamiques), Timbuktu, is the only significant public institution in Mali, regulated by the Ministry of Education, which represents the single largest collection of manuscripts. There are nine other collections in Timbuktu whose owners set up a separate network of manuscript libraries, such as the “Association des bibliothèques pour le soutien et la promotion des initiatives à Tombouctou” (ABISOPI).

The manuscripts represent texts on a variety of topics and in many languages. From the Qur'anic sciences and Islamic law to astronomy, mathematics, history and medicine, the Timbuktu manuscripts form an invaluable source for several fields of research:

*Covering the span of time from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Timbuktu manuscripts epitomise the scholarly and scribal activity in the city and beyond, including the whole region of Mali, its immediate neighbours, and the Mediterranean and central Islamic lands.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Several studies have been devoted to the topic; for a general overview, including the intersecting of religious and cultural aspects, one of the most relevant contribution is from John Hunwick, *West Africa, Islam, and the Arab world. Studies in honor of Basil Davidson* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publ., 2006); see also Graziano Krätli, *The trans-Saharan booktrade* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Abd al-Qādir Mammā Ḥaidara and ‘Alī Mūḡānī, *Maktabat Mammā Ḥaidara li-l-Maḥṭūṭāt wa-l-Waṭā’iq* (Qum: Kitābhāna-i Buzurg-i Ḥadrat Āyatullāh al-‘Uẓmā Mar’asī Naḡafī, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Dmitry Bondarev et al., *Rettung der Manuskripte aus Timbuktu* (Hamburg: Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, 2014), 6. In this booklet main information about the projects developed in 2013-2014 by Hamburg University.

It was highlighted on several occasions, including the conference held in January 2015 in Bamako<sup>4</sup>, that one of the most important features of the Timbuktu manuscripts is that they witness complex written cultures in West Africa, many manuscripts being written both in Arabic and African languages in Arabic script (for example manuscripts with annotations in Songhai, Fulani, Soninke and Bamana).

As for their physical characteristics, the majority of the manuscripts are in loose-leaf format, often kept inside a cover, but also simply wrapped by cord; only a few manuscripts are bound. The relevance of this aspect should not be underestimated, and especially in consideration of required preservation measures. On the one hand, loose leaves are no doubt easier to digitize than bound manuscripts; on the other hand, other issues such as the correct order of leaves and the completeness of single manuscripts affect preservation and cataloguing activities, requiring at least a preliminary numbering of leaves. Therefore, risks of losing or misplacing the leaves during preservation procedures must be taken into serious consideration.

Another important aspect is the definition of what constitutes a single manuscript. The criterium based on the European, North African and Middle Eastern book cultures which identifies single manuscripts as a bound book/codex with a fixed number of folios, can hardly be applied to the sub-Saharan Islamic manuscripts which typically do not have fixed binding and often may consist of only a few sheets of paper. The codicological characteristics of these manuscripts are of great interest for the study of paper trade and its impact on the development of African manuscript cultures. Thus, we find paper from Western mills characterised by laid and chain lines and watermarks, as well as the so-called “oriental paper” without watermarks and with a characteristic arrangement of chain lines and laid lines. At the same time, the decorative patterns of leatherwork and structure of leather folders, which are used to keep the manuscripts as single units, were produced locally. The study of the types of leather folders in Africa is long overdue.

The preservation conditions of collections remain problematic, as highlighted in previous assessments<sup>5</sup>: damages due to natural aging and decay of materials are combined with damages due to insects, climate conditions, and handling. Paper and leather are brittle and tend to crackling due to climate and other factors, such as contact with acidic materials and dust. The current tight storage of the manuscripts in the metal chests exacerbated by air stagnation in the improvised storage rooms only aggravates the situation. In these circumstances, the priority must be given to emergency measures covering the whole entirety of the collections, as explained later.

### **Manuscripts in Bamako: issues and opportunities**

The evacuation of collections to Bamako which is situated in a climate zone very different from that of Timbuktu, caused a number of problems related to the physical preservation of manuscripts. Another issue is related to the fact that the manuscript collections are private property and the dislocation of the collections to the place so remote from Timbuktu raised concerns on the side of the owners.

From the point of view of physical preservation, the most relevant problems are linked to climatic conditions which are very different in Bamako and Timbuktu. Timbuktu lies in a dry desert climate whereas Bamako is characterised by a much more humid climate, with intensive rainy period. The combined effect of heat and humidity is very harmful for the manuscripts and challenging for preservation. As for the storage, the unprecedented amount of the manuscripts (about 300.000, on the basis of an approximate estimation) requires storage rooms spacious enough to accommodate the manuscripts on the shelves and equipped with climate control. Until recently, most of the manuscripts were inside the metal chests that had been used for transportation. It is ironical that these chests first helped save the manuscripts from the insurgency threat in Timbuktu but now pose a considerable problem even for short/medium-term preservation due to the fact that the sealed climate that develops

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<sup>4</sup> Conférence Internationale sur les Manuscrits Anciens du Mali: <http://www.cimam-2015.org> (last accessed 29 May 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Bondarev et al., *Rescue*, 21-25.

inside the chests dangerously increases the risk of mould growth. As part of provisional measures, the shelves are currently being installed in some of the temporary storage rooms that have been provided with air conditioners, dehumidifiers and fans.

The undesired transfer of the manuscripts to Bamako triggered by the unrest in the North has paradoxically created an opportunity to raise awareness of the manuscript heritage in Mali and attract funding not only for preservation but also cataloguing, digitisation and research of the Timbuktu manuscripts in exile.

### **The German efforts in safeguarding Timbuktu manuscripts**

Over the last three years, the international community of scholars and stakeholders have made efforts to provide technical and financial support for safeguarding the cultural heritage embodied in the Timbuktu manuscripts.

In 2013, following an agreement between SAVAMA-DCI and CSMC, the University of Hamburg, has started a pilot project supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation (GHS) and the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Auswärtiges Amt, henceforth AA). The project aimed at assessing the characteristics and conditions of manuscripts moved to Bamako and putting emergency measures in place. A solar panel system has been installed to ensure climate control in the main building of SAVAMA-DCI; dehumidifiers and fans have been installed in the provisional storage rooms; and training workshops convened by the German specialists have been organized in order to provide training for the Malian technicians working at SAVAMA.

In 2014, further funding from AA and GHS allowed for a more extensive range of preservation measures. Several workshops on preservation were organized in Bamako with 24 participants from Bamako, Timbuktu and Djenné. The main focus of these workshops was preventive measures such as dusting, surface cleaning and boxing. The German project provided SAVAMA with preservation material, cardboard and equipment with a view to setting up a comprehensive and homogeneous preservation plan for collections.

At the same time, the manuscripts started being digitized and inventoried. Digitization has been undertaken since 2013 with the financial and expert support of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML), Saint John's University.<sup>6</sup> A digitization studio was fully equipped at SAVAMA-DCI where local technicians have been making digital images of the manuscripts.

The inventory of the manuscripts is being created in Arabic and French. These preliminary lists only include very basic information such title of the work, name of the author, subject, number of folios and physical condition. Such lists will serve as the basis for further cataloguing projects and research.

There was also some work done in Timbuktu, mostly concerning reconstruction or renovation of the private libraries. In 2014, four libraries were renovated with the support of the German project.

The conservation treatment of the manuscripts has until now been limited. The priority was given to emergency measures and first-aid preservation procedures in order to establish basic preservation standards to be applied to all collections currently deposited in Bamako. These measures mainly include dusting and boxing. The follow-up workshops planned for this year will stress the importance of providing the owners with advice on manuscript care and handling as well as essential information about the causes of paper and leather decay. The strategy for training workshops must be carefully

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hmml.org/news--media/hmml-digitizes-timbuktus-historic-manuscript-collections> (last accessed 29 May 2015).

planned: current international standards for training in manuscript preservation discourage from undertaking hasty initiatives of spot- training in conservation.<sup>7</sup>

The main outputs of the project achieved in 2014 and the first quarter of 2015 are as follows.

- 33000 inventoried manuscripts from 4 libraries (Infa Yattara, Ahmed Boularaf, Sidi Zeyane, Mamma Haidara);
- 3960 boxes for 34234 manuscripts;
- Renovation of six libraries in Timbuktu.

### **Improving initiatives, fostering cooperation**

The current project was extended for another two years thanks to the on-going financial support by GHS and AA. The project will continue with the preservation measures and research and will also participate in the events planned for the scholarly community and general public and devoted to the importance of manuscript preservation, cataloguing, digitisation and research.

The research activity will be covering three major fields such as (1) codicology and palaeography, (2) study of textual content of the manuscripts, and (3) material analysis.

Thus, the CSMC-based team of specialists will organise a workshop to be held in Bamako in October 2015 that will be dealing with chemical and spectroscopic analysis of manuscripts – the methods used for the recovery of erased or faded texts, identification of ink ingredients, and study of illuminations.

Each manuscript is a rich and unique aggregation of information related to a diverse range of cultural contexts. A manuscript may say a lot about paper trade and intellectual exchange, about channels of knowledge transmissions, development of ideological concepts and literary genres, about ethnic, linguistic and religious identities of the scribes, as well as literacy practices in multilingual African societies.

Multilingual literacy in the Malian Islamic manuscripts is a special subject of the CSMC-based project “African voices in Islamic manuscripts from Mali: a study of African languages written in Arabic-based script (Ajami)”<sup>8</sup>, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation and supervised by Dmitry Bondarev. The project research team includes specialists from Mali, Germany and France.

It is important to underline the necessity of raising awareness about Malian manuscripts in general. There is always a risk that the Timbuktu libraries may easily overshadow other rich manuscript collections innumerable in Mali, simply because of a wave of media coverage solely dedicated to Timbuktu. As a result, the initiatives by the owners or activists in the regions of Gao, Djenné, Segou, Mopti and many other places rarely attract international attention which, in turn, results in the lack of resources needed for some basic preservation and cataloguing, let alone accessibility of the manuscripts for research. This consideration prompts the CSMC position on diversification of the financial and academic support of the Malian manuscript libraries.

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<sup>7</sup> Recent manuscript preservation projects in Mauritania gained important experience in training workshops, cf.: Alessandro Giacomello and Alessandro Pesaro (eds), *Sauvegarde des bibliothèques du désert. Matériaux didactiques* (Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia: Centro di Catalogazione e Restauro dei Beni Culturali, Passariano (UD), 2009). Also available on-line: [http://www.sirpac-fvg.org/\\_data/contenuti/allegati/ita/Mauritania\\_Sauvegarde\\_des\\_bibliotheques\\_du\\_desert\\_Materiaux\\_didactiques.pdf](http://www.sirpac-fvg.org/_data/contenuti/allegati/ita/Mauritania_Sauvegarde_des_bibliotheques_du_desert_Materiaux_didactiques.pdf). (last accessed 29 May 2015).

<sup>8</sup> For a general overview on Ajami manuscripts see Dmitry Bondarev ‘Multiglossia in West African manuscripts: the case of Borno, Nigeria’, in Jörg B. Quenzer, Dmitry Bondarev and Jan-Ulrich Sobisch (eds), *Manuscript cultures: mapping the field* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 113-155; Meikal Mumin and Kees Versteegh (eds), *The Arabic script in Africa: studies in the use of a writing system (Studies in Semitic languages and linguistics)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Lameen Souag, ‘Ajami in West Africa’, *Afrikanistik online* 2010, <http://www.afrikanistik-online.de/archiv/2010/2957> (last accessed 29 May 2015).

## Future perspectives

The tragic events in Timbuktu and the exodus of the manuscripts that followed brought about the accumulation of an unprecedented number of manuscripts in Bamako, paradoxically giving a unique chance of introducing unified preservation techniques, coordinating workflow of emergency measures, as well as undertaking specific comparative research, for example, the identification of Ajami manuscripts and the selection of historical accounts of the Massina Empire.

Based on this particular momentum of so many Timbuktu collections being in Bamako, several initiatives were put forward to give the general public an opportunity to better understand the intellectual importance of the Malian manuscript cultures. One such initiative coordinated by the Institut Français and the German Embassy, called “Paroles de sagesse”, is planned to take place during the first two weeks of October 2015. A series of activities including exhibitions, workshops, and film screenings will be addressed mainly to the general public and schools. However, there will be a set of workshops specifically designed for the interested custodians of manuscript collections from Mali and other Sahelian countries, including Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon. These specialist workshops will cover the most basic matters of preservation, digitisation, cataloguing, and material analysis. The workshops have been organized by CSMC, the University of Hamburg, in close collaboration with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, the Islamic Manuscripts Association (TIMA), Centre for Contemporary Islam and Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA), both at the University of Cape Town.

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