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## **Library Heroes or Book Smugglers? The Story of the Manuscripts of Timbuktu**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents the remarkable story of the very old manuscripts in Timbuktu, found in the archives of official institutions as well as in private collections. Going beyond the myths of illiterate Africa, the paper attempts to expose the thriving scholar activity and bibliophilic importance of the city of Timbuktu, the heart of intellectual history of Western Africa. A particular emphasis is put on the crucial role many courageous Malian librarians and conservationists had in their bold attitude to the warriors under the Jihadi occupation. In 2013 their adventurous evacuation of the books was pivotal to the salvation of their precious cultural heritage.

*Keywords:* *librarian, library, manuscripts, documents, collection, archive, Western Africa*

For a very long time the American and European readers envisaged the legendary city of Timbuktu as the epitome of exotic mystery, the most remote realm one could possibly think of, a fictionalized topos to which Paul Auster referred memorably in his novel *Timbuktu*: “Where the map of this world ends, that's where the map of Timbuktu begins.” Timbuktu had been for centuries not only a very wealthy commercial city but also a thriving bibliophilic center when the Scottish explorer Alexander Gordon Laing discovered it at last, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hunwick & Jay Boye, 2008; Hammer, 2016; Charlie, 2017a, 2017b). Ironically, the newly “discovered” city was not at all inferior to the explorer’s world, on the contrary, “while Europe was still groping its way through the dark ages, Timbuktu was a beacon of intellectual enlightenment”, where “hundreds of thousands of manuscripts [had been] written in Arabic and various African languages” by the time Europeans arrived (Macyntire, 2016). A well documented intellectual history of the region has to take into consideration many intricate political, social and religious aspects, explaining how European colonial discourse wrongly imposed the assumption of orality as the predominant feature of the Western African culture (Kane, 2016).

Timbuktu has been a World Heritage Site since 1990, nevertheless its scholarly and historiographic tradition had been almost neglected by the western civilization and it was only recently that the attention of researchers has been caught by the rich cultural history of this part of the world. The year 2003 marked a watershed for the international recognition of the importance of the literary production of Timbuktu. In the summer of 2003 the Library of Congress in Washington held an impressively valuable exhibition

entitled “Ancient Manuscripts from the Desert Libraries of Timbuktu”. It presented manuscripts from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> that covered “every aspect of human endeavor”, “indicative of the high level of civilization attained by West Africans during the Middle Ages” (<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mali/>). Nowadays thirty two manuscripts are available online in a database of the museum called *Islamic Manuscripts from Mali*, taken from two important institution in Timbuktu, Mali, the Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library and the Library Cheick Zayni Baye of Boujbeha. The digitalized manuscripts were chosen to represent “the wide variety of subjects covered by the written traditions of Timbuktu, Mali, and West Africa”, wherein the various writing styles of Arabic script displayed by the manuscripts originated (<https://memory.loc.gov/intldl/malihtml/malihome.html>). If the readers go into more details regarding the history of these precious artifacts, they will find out from the above mentioned site of this rare collection that the “digital copies of the manuscripts were donated by Abdel Kader Haidara, owner and director of the Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library”. It is a short but important notice that acknowledges the crucial role a doggedly brave librarian had in the process of preservation and salvation of the ancient documents. As argued in this paper, Abdel Kader Haidara hence has become the eponym of the African book rescue and the protagonist of the successful story of the manuscripts of Timbuktu.

In 2003 as well the Timbuktu Manuscripts Project was officially launched, with the support of Gerda Henkel Stiftung and the University of Cape Town, dedicated to research the archive of handwritten documents “in Arabic and in African languages in the Arabic script, produced between the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries” in West Africa and the Sahara (<https://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org/>). According to the site, at around fifty thousand manuscripts can be easily consulted by the public in the accessible libraries established in Timbuktu: Ahmed Baba Institute, opened in 1973 and five more libraries opened from the 1990s: Mamma Haidara, Fondo Ka’ti, Al-Wangari, Imam Soyuti, Jingere-Ber. Apart from them, there are sixteen more libraries in the city, for the time being not as easily accessible as the ones mentioned above.

One of the largest and oldest collections in the Timbuktu that dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century is the personal library of the Haidara family, renowned for its scholars and judges ([http://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org/libraries/the\\_mamma\\_haidara\\_memorial\\_library/](http://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org/libraries/the_mamma_haidara_memorial_library/)). In 1981 the great scholar Mamma Haidara died and Abdel Kader Haidara inherited officially the library. As the conscientious descendant of this prestigious family and its outstanding legacy, Abdel Kader has been taking great care of the inherited collection, doing both cataloguing and conservation work. He also worked at Ahmed Baba Centre for Documentation and Research or Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Research, as it is now called, for many years. The most prestigious bibliophilic institution of Timbuktu, dating back in the 16<sup>th</sup> c, Ahmed Baba Institute has been hosted by a new building since 2009 and officially launched as to promote “the conservation, research and promotion of the manuscripts as African heritage”, offering “state-of-the-art resources for the proper storage and preservation of the manuscripts” ([http://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org/libraries/ahmed\\_baba\\_institute\\_of\\_higher\\_learning\\_and\\_islamic\\_research\\_iheri-ab/](http://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org/libraries/ahmed_baba_institute_of_higher_learning_and_islamic_research_iheri-ab/)).

But the history of all these numerous libraries and librarians, also named “desert librarians”, was as troubled as the history of the people of Timbuktu. For example even a long time ago, books together with their owners were victims of invaders: during the Moroccan invasion at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Ahmed Baba was exiled and much of his library unfortunately was destroyed.

More recently, during the radical Islamist forces occupation of Timbuktu that started in 2012, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) focused as usual on violent religious cleansing. The jihadi army imposed their strict principles therefore the destruction of any heretical symbol was at the forefront of their policies. One of their targets became also the manuscripts within the libraries of the city, luckily towards the end of their occupation. Therefore those passionate about the collections of the old documents were allowed quite enough time to develop “smuggling” nets in order to save as much possible of the city’s archives.

The year 2013 was a milestone in the cultural history of Timbuktu: the threat was the erasure of the historical, cultural and intellectual memory of the city through the almost imminent destruction of thousands of documents testifying the golden age of Western African civilization. The news was quite shocking at the time, speaking of an alleged destruction and burning to the ground of the manuscripts, in January 2013: “fleeing rebels burnt down the Ahmed Baba Institute, destroying ancient manuscripts” (<https://www.dw.com/en/mali-alleged-timbuktu-destroyer-to-appear-at-international-criminal-court/a-43212936>), “Malian Islamist rebels set fire to a library at the Ahmed Baba Institute of Islamic Advanced Studies and Research in Timbuktu. The library contained about 20,000 priceless manuscripts.” (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2013/jan/28/ahmed-baba-library-torched-islamist-pictures>) The news agencies were citing the mayor of the city, Hallé Ousmani Cissé. In a phone interview for *The Guardian*, he said that the jihadi rebels had burned the manuscripts, adding that the information came from an informer who had just left the town (Harding, 2013). Luckily the informer was wrong. Actually accurate information was impossible to obtain at the beginning, because communication with Timbuktu (left without electricity for some time) was very limited, but afterwards the real fate of the manuscripts was gradually revealed. The militants had already destroyed tens of Suni shrines but they had not touched any manuscripts in ten months of occupation, so just before having to flee for fear of the French military intervention, “they took the time to commit one last act of vengeance”, to destroy also the archive at the Institute, the “offending texts” covering a broad range of science, “from history to geography and astronomy, medicine and Islamic law”, some of them dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Fessy, 2013). The good news spread quickly after only a few days, contradicting the exaggerated terrible reports about the irreparable loss, stating that the library Ahmed Baba Institute was still standing, only a small part of the manuscripts were burnt and most of them were saved by local librarians and preservationists (Walt, 2013; Balter, 2013).

In the months to come, several journalists eager to find the truth went to Timbuktu where they attempted to construct the remarkable story of the manuscripts. When the travel

writer Patrick Symmes meets Abdel Kader Haidara, “44, a round-bellied scholar from the Sahara, with a cloudy left eye and a simple white robe” he experiences an epiphanic moment:

I was having an Indiana Jones moment. I opened a trunk and gently swept my fingers over the tooled-leather bindings and the soft edges of rag paper. I picked out a book and opened it, the pages crackling, the calligraphy stunning after some 500 years of sitting in dark rooms. I found myself stroking the books, inhaling their smell. I opened cases at random, discovering treasures that I would never be allowed to touch in a museum. (Symmes, 2014)

The retreating rebels took out around 4,000 manuscripts from the library of the institute and set them ablaze, but what they didn't know was that “the vast majority of the city's manuscripts were already gone”, in “a remarkable effort by ordinary Malians to smuggle out these treasures, by truck and trunk, donkey and canoe” (Symmes, 2014). The bonfire didn't cause therefore very much damage, all the more so as the rebels were in a hurry and not all the paper in the courtyard caught fire. But the fate of the manuscripts hidden away was not very clear either, because of their vulnerability to weather, transport, storage conditions and, why not, a possible return of the jihaidis, of which Abdel Kader Haidara and other conservationists were still worried about. Therefore for security reasons they were quite reluctant to reveal details about the evacuation of the books (Child, 2017a, 321-322). But other librarians and guardians of the city's archives, some of them foreign researchers, told their stories about the salvation of the documents. They had been under pressure for months and desperately putting off the jihadis who were asking for the manuscripts, especially the sacred Islamic books. The solution was to pack up whole collections of manuscripts into donkey-borne sacks and trunks and distribute them to tens of families in their houses. Then many of them were evacuated from Timbuktu following various risky smuggling routes, and beginning with the fall of 2012 boxes of books even found their escape by canoe.

The image of the librarians defying the armed rebels remains maybe one of the most powerful symbol of an enduring culture: the librarians literally grabbed books and hid them under their robes, thus taking them out of the buildings scrutinized by the occupying army. “The librarians simply grabbed books and walked out, passing with fake confidence by armed men ready to kill them. The sound of a culture surviving was the discreet rustling of men's underpants.” (Symmes, 2014). Informed by the metaphor of “rustling” as a form of both instinctual and cultural resistance to barbarism and war, Charlie English called the rescuers “the book rustlers”. (English, 2014) Later on, the same author will go more thoroughly into the story of the manuscripts, choosing the phrase “book smugglers”. (Charlie, 2017a). Another journalist was preoccupied by the same story and call them “bad-ass librarians” (Hammer, 2016). A “bad-ass” librarian or simply a very conscientious scholar (cf. Macintyre, 2016), Abdel Kader Haidara can be considered without any doubt the protagonist of this literary true-to-life thriller. Because much work had to be done after the jihad was over and Timbuktu won its peace: manuscripts had to be recovered and stored again where they belonged. Supported by

various funds received from abroad, Haidara was the first to initiate a project called “Action Plan for the Rescue, Preservation and Valorization of the Timbuktu Manuscripts Evacuated in Bamako” that aimed to catalogue, conserve, digitize and research the documents, with details of the costs needed. (Charlie, 2017a, 324) After his example, more similar initiatives followed. However, there are doubts shadowing the Indiana Jones adventure: discrepancies regarding the number of private libraries evacuated, the number of manuscripts brought back to Timbuktu, and even the different variants of the same story, as Haidara warns English: “There is not only one account of the evacuation ... each person will have his own take on it. Bruce [Hall] will have one account, Ismael another, Maiga yet another, while I have my own version. All these accounts will be different, but they will all be true. If everyone agreed what the story was, then it would certainly not be true.” (Charlie, 2017a, 336) It seems that Timbuktu cannot get rid of its legendary aura, myth remains after all a constitutive part of its layered and mysterious history.

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