

The Librarians of Timbuktu  
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UCV

Fifteen years ago, a BBC business page described the West African nation of Mali in these memorable words: “most of Mali consists of nothing.” Nothing. If you reckon a nation and size up its people in terms of financial heft and geo-political might, then Mali is a negligible place. If you think of deserts as so much blank nothingness, then surely, the two thirds of Mali’s landmass—twice the size of France—stretching from the massive Niger and Senegal Rivers north into the Sahara and neighbouring Algeria and Mauritania amounts to just so much insignificance. Of no account, as well, in comparison to the strategic significance and populations of Egypt, Nigeria, the Congo and South Africa. Before preparing for these remarks, what did I know of the work of Malian peoples to overcome the humiliation of having been subject to European imperialism? Or being the plaything of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund? Or of the incompetence and corruption of a succession tin pot rulers and military juntas, that brought Malians, who’d finally had enough, into the streets in March 1991, in their own Spring revolution; a mostly nonviolent movement that ushered in two decades of functioning democracy, freedom of the press and an irrepressible arts and culture scene?

Mali is an inter-ethnic nation-state of 15 million people, with twelve recognized languages, carved out of the remains of French colonial domains. It’s largely self-sustaining in agriculture, a major producer and exporter of cotton, home of extraordinarily vibrant traditional and contemporary musical life, and site of astounding UNESCO World Heritage designated towns, mosques, mausoleums and public holy places.

Mali has a storied past as a significant religious, cultural, scientific and commercial crossroads whose residents traveled throughout Asia, Africa and Europe. While Europe was still groping through its so-called Dark Ages, it was the intellectual heart of the sub-Saharan Africa and famous for educating important scholars renowned throughout the Islamic world. Its preeminent city—the fabled Timbuktu—was known as the pearl of the desert, the home of 333 saints, a beacon of intellectual enlightenment and probably the most book-loving city in the world. At the height of its fame in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, one quarter of Timbuktu’s then 100,000 inhabitants was comprised of university students, scholars and artists—think Oxford, England and Florence, Italy—and you get the picture of Timbuktu at the height of its glory. As one proverb put it: “Salt comes from the north and gold from the south, but the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuktu.” But glory is a passing thing.

Beginning with the invasion of Moroccan armies in 1590s, the disruption of trans-Saharan trade routes and commerce, decades long droughts and famine, and the seizure of the country by imperial France, Timbuktu—its university, population, wealth, cultural life and influence—declined into a shadow of its former self. But the treasures of wisdom of Timbuktu—what became of them? If we take it literally, *that* treasure was largely preserved in 100,000s of handwritten manuscripts and books created by scholars and scribes during Timbuktu’s era of greatest power and renown.

As well as religious texts, those treasures included works of poetry, algebra, physics, medicine, biography, law, history, botany, geography, astronomy, as well as personal diaries and letters. From the 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the scholars of Timbuktu debated issues of political economy, philosophy, ethics, jurisprudence, marriage and sex. The city was a readers’ paradise, its inhabitants searching with a real passion for volumes they did not possess, and making copies

when they were too poor to buy what they wanted. The whole place was an incubator for the richness of Islam, which, in those days, thrived on a tradition of open-minded inquiry and love of learning, poetry, arts and human beauty.

I don't want to take away from the Irish, but, contrary to the title of a recent popular book, they didn't save western civilization—it was the scholars and rulers of the Muslim world, who, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and for the next three hundred years, gathered in, preserved, treasured and expanded upon the learning and culture of the ancient world—especially of Greece and Persia. When classical Europe had broken apart and devolved into a feudal, narrow minded backwater, scholars in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Shiraz and Timbuktu were reading and exploring Plato and Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen, Euclid and Democritus. The monuments of medieval and early modern European learning, arts and sciences, much of what we know of the classical world, exist because of the ardour for knowledge and wisdom that possessed the Islamic world. *Just to set the record straight:* It was the learning of Islamic philosophers, scientists, theologians and jurists, the books they wrote, the libraries and universities they created and the knowledge they eventually transmitted that helped enable Christian Europe to slowly wake up from its five hundred years of ignorance and squalor.

Back to Timbuktu: if your city is occupied by foreign armies, if commerce is disrupted and trade routes to the outside world cut off, if the population is decimated and scattered by drought and famine—what do you do with “the treasures of wisdom found only in Timbuktu”: the extensive trove of books and manuscripts which were the city's glory? You hide them beneath floorboards, hidden wall niches, and caves in the nearby desert—you preserve and keep them hoping for a better, safer, more tolerant age to come. That's exactly what happened.

Forty families in Timbuktu designated themselves as custodians of these written treasures. Each family appointed one of their children to look after the documents for the next generation—it was a system that worked and lasted down through the centuries of famine, invasions and occupation.

Abdel Kader Haidara (whose photo you see on the cover of the order of service) was a son of a scholar and inherited the family's extensive manuscript collection when his father died. In 1984, he was commissioned by the Ahmed Baba Institute to track down and begin to identify the scores of family collections scattered in and beyond Timbuktu. The work of the Institute was motivated by UNESCO designating Timbuktu mosques, mausoleums and university as World Heritage Sites, and by the desire to bring the world's attention to Mali's former greatness and the tolerant form of Islam that had flourished there.

Dr Haidara's work became crucial for what happened to the city and the region around Timbuktu in 2012. Flush with arms looted from the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, severely puritanical fighters of what's called Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, invaded northern Mali and took over Timbuktu. This militant group was notorious, along with the Taliban and ISIS, for systematically destroying, not only the art and cultural artifacts of non Islamic religions, they also singled out for destruction the tombs of Sufi and Shi'a saints and scholars, and collections of books and art created by Islamic thinkers and artists of all kinds—that is, whatever artifact of Islamic civilization and practice that did not conform to their rigid notion of religious orthodoxy.

And it happened: Al Qaeda takes over Timbuktu; first, they loot and kill as invaders do; and then they totally demolish the tombs of sainted figures from the past; they damage the 15<sup>th</sup> century Sidi Yahya mosque; women are beaten for walking in the company of men and forced to

wear veils; music—so well beloved by Malians—is banned as un-Islamic and replaced with uninterrupted radio broadcasts of reading of the Quran; musicians are beaten, art's destroyed, suspected thieves are summarily disfigured; men who wear their pants too short or allow their cell phones to ring with western tunes are all liable to a thrashing or worse.

It was heartbreaking; in the words of one resident—“you must understand; we are a city that has had Islam for one thousand years. We had the greatest teachers and universities. And now these illiterates, these ignoramuses, tell us how to say our prayers and how our wives should dress, as if they were the ones who invented the one and only way to live and be!”

“Before the hour of their arrival,” said Dr Haidara, referring to the Al Qaeda invaders, “we didn't think they would come to Timbuktu. People were a bit scared but they didn't feel there was any great danger.” But then the looting started and the demolition of shrines and tombs—and “I became very, very afraid. It was a great catastrophe...and I knew that one day they would enter our libraries, and smash and burn everything.” Something had to be done. “The books and manuscripts are a part not only of Mali's heritage but the world's heritage,” says the Halle Cisse, the mayor of Timbuktu. “By destroying them, they threaten the world.”

With Al Qaeda fighters having taken over the Ahmed Baba Institute and its library as a barracks, with feared members of the so-called Hisbah or Right Manners Brigade roaming the streets and enforcing severe discipline, and the population rigid with fear, Dr Haidara secretly assembled members of 40 families—the custodians of books and manuscripts—to create a plan to rescue their priceless written treasure. “The advice we had received from people who had worked on cultural heritage in Iraq and Afghanistan was clear,” said Dr Haidara: “we had to move the documents out of the city.”

Beginning in April 2012, individual families gathered in their collections from hiding places in their homes and the countryside during afternoon siestas and under cover of darkness. Three groups were formed: one in Bamako, the capital city of Mali 700 kms to the southwest; one in Timbuktu to collect, box and prepare the books and manuscripts for shipping, and a third group to act as couriers. They communicated by cheap cell phones that could be easily discarded and hard to trace.

By the end of May, almost all of the private collections had been moved to safe houses in the city. Dr Haidara and his team in Timbuktu carefully packed the documents in steel lockers—the kind frequently used throughout Mali to transport all kinds of goods. Funds from the Netherlands, Germany, the US and Dubai helped pay for the lockers, shipping and storage.

One particularly daring operation was the removal of close to 90% of the manuscripts and papers stored at the Ahmed Baba Institute. The Al Qaeda men using the Institute as a barracks “went to sleep between 2 and 4 pm,” said Mohamed Maiga, “so that’s when I went in. We took the manuscripts and put them into bags. At night, we’d go back and with handcarts brought the bags to the safe houses of our colleagues....I was afraid that if the jihadists caught me, they would cut my hands off. But God is merciful, and we were able to remove 30,000 manuscripts out from under their noses.”

The shipping of the book and manuscript packed lockers was done by Timbuktu traders accompanied by designated couriers. Most of the lockers were placed, two or three at a time, on four wheel drive bush taxis; others were stowed away on canoes and shipped down river. Lockers were concealed under crates of vegetables and fruits. To avoid the jihadi checkpoints, courier teams drove overland in the open desert through territory nominally controlled by different factions of militants. 250 kms to the south, they would join up with the main road and

streams of refugees. At government checkpoints, once soldiers confirmed the librarian couriers were only carrying books and papers and not weapons, they were allowed to continue on their way to the capital city where the librarian teams received the treasured documents and stored them in hidden locations all around the capital city.

The size of the operation was astounding: according to the librarians, they had almost 400,000 manuscripts and books to move, in 2500 lockers, each the size of a small trunk. By the end of the summer of 2014, Timbuktu and rest of central and northern Mali had been retaken by French and Malian government troops. The librarians and custodians of these priceless collections estimated that 95% of Timbuktu's threatened books and manuscripts had been successfully rescued.

The threat to the survival of these documents was not hypothetical, and the librarians and couriers had run great risks to save them. As French and Malian forces fought their way toward Timbuktu, Al Qaeda militants torched the 4200 manuscripts left in the libraries of the Ahmed Baba Institute. "Though we saved so many, I think people were very affected by the loss," said Mohamed Diagayete, a Timbuktu archivist and courier. "We're saddened because every manuscript is different. For some, there are no copies, and if they are gone, they are lost forever."

"The significance of the books and manuscripts of Timbuktu are enormous," said Dr Michael Hassler of the Gerda Henkel Foundation which helped fund the rescue operation. These collections are "the most important written tradition of west Africa history and culture. This is an untapped treasure trove of unthinkable value—they cover every aspect of human endeavor." The irony is that the Islamists bent on their destruction accidentally have now drawn worldwide

attention to Timbuktu's literary heritage and have thus enabled the first full accounting of its magnificence.

For those of you keeping track, this is the second time I've spoken publicly about librarians and their efforts to save books and manuscripts crucial to the heritage of Islam. Five years ago, almost to the day, I shared with you the extraordinary story of how the librarians of the Gazi Husrav Library in Sarajevo, in the face of remorseless bombardment and murderous sniper fire, boxed up thousands of priceless manuscripts of Islamic culture and the history of the Bosnian people, and then courageously carried them by hand through the streets, braving shells and dodging bullets in order to deposit them in places of safety. When asked why they risked their lives to save them, Mustafa Jahic and his staff said: "we had a duty.... Of course it was worth risking our lives....These are the treasures of civilization and they belong to everyone. Books are our past, our roots; and without a past there is no present, no future. Saving them was equal to saving human lives."

2017 marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. While much of that cultural, religious and political movement was necessary, enlightened and peaceful—it is bracing and necessary to remember as well, that in spasmodic fits, Christian religious zealots, like those of our own contemporary Islamic jihadists, possessed with a crippled vision of so-called progress through regression, hewed religious statuary into pieces, defiled the graves of saints, destroyed treasures of religious art and burned books. They did it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and it's happening in our own day, due to the misplaced belief; a belief that the corruption of institutions and the bewildering change in our societies can somehow be arrested and transfigured through the radical, revolutionary surgery—through the wiping out of history,

complexity, difference, and the difficult push and pull of dialogue between the present and the past, and between people of different faiths and systems of value.

When that one resident of Timbuktu complained of those “illiterates and ignoramuses” of Al Qaeda who occupied his city and told them “how to say our prayers and how our wives should dress, as if they were the ones who invented the one and only way to live and be!--” it struck me: *I need to look at myself*—to check my own prejudices and privilege, my ignorance and not-so-occasional contempt about many things—my own beliefs about what constitutes authentic religion and my notions about the right way of being a political, social and religious person.

So—in closing, I don’t want to be remembered or depicted in art as among those who, so confidently believed in progress through simplification and regression to a so-called golden age of the past—and in spite of calls and the temptations to “simplify, simplify,” may I and we, in all our ragged, broken, complex glory, be numbered among those who, like the librarians of Timbuktu and Sarajevo, wagered their lives for the sake of the complex treasures and heritage of the past—believing, with them, that our books, our roots, our myriad ways of being human are essential to our own being now, and for the sake of generations to come.