

Rescue of manuscripts from Timbuktu, 2014-2018

CSMC and SAVAMA-DCI combined presentation

Protecting and studying the manuscripts of Mali

Dmitry Bondarev

In autumn of 1588, 430 years ago, the most celebrated Timbuktu scholar Ahmad Baba finished his book on avoidance of oppressive governors called *Jalb al-ni'ma wa daf' al niqma bi-mujānab al-wulat al-zalama* 'delivery of blessing and payment of revenge in avoidance of oppressive governors'.

In this book Ahmad Baba appealed to the scholars and all those who care about the safety of their souls and want to escape peril. Ahmad Baba advised them to avoid all dealings with oppressive rulers.

The last time Timbuktu fell to the oppressors was on the 1st of April 2012 when the radical Islamist fighters and rebels took the city and imposed severe punitive rules on its inhabitants.

In line with the advice of Ahmad Baba, many families who feared about the safety of their lives and safety of their manuscripts decided to avoid dealings with the oppressors and move their intellectual heritage out from the occupied city. The dramatic displacement of manuscripts was organised by Dr. Abdel Kader Haidara, (whose organisation NGO SAVAMA-DCI received the UNESCO Jikji prize on 1 October this year).

Thousands of big and small manuscripts were transferred to Bamako. But because of the hazards of the rescue operation, the manuscripts arrived in disorder. They were transported in metal chests – very perilous in the humid climate of Bamako. Therefore, the priority was to create inventory lists of all the manuscripts and preserve them in protective boxes.

To contribute to these preservation measures the UHH, supported by AA, GHS, and Jutta Fogel, joined SAVAMA and started the project which we celebrate today. In this project, to pursue research into the Malian Islamic manuscripts written in Arabic and in many sub-Saharan languages, we also partnered with the University of Bamako and the Research Institute Ahmed Baba (IHERI-AB). Our collaborative research has reached many other regions of Mali, such as Ségou, Djenné, Mopti and Kayes. Paraphrasing another great Malian intellectual, Amadou Hampate Ba, we can say that using different paths we all reach the common goal of preserving and understanding the Malian written heritage.

Activities and Outputs

Maria Luisa Russo

The Timbuktu project has been based on three axes of activities, which corresponded to the essential and urgent needs of the manuscripts recovered in Bamako:

1. Preservation measures: the condition of the manuscripts was very problematic. Cleaning, boxmaking, and the equipping of appropriate storage rooms were therefore very necessary activities.
2. Handlists: the creation of handlists of manuscripts in French and Arabic was needed in order to guarantee that the collections of each library were preserved in their own identity and listed separately;
3. The renovation of library buildings in Timbuktu and supplying them with basic equipment.

In the years 2014-2018 the project financed by German donors achieved the following outcomes:

- 26,558 boxes were made, in which 241,324 manuscripts are preserved;
- Handlists of 236,000 manuscripts were made in French and Arabic; out of these, the translation into French of the handlists of 65,000 manuscripts of the 2018 project will be finalised by the end of this year;
- Eighteen libraries in Timbuktu and were renovated and supplied with equipment; two more libraries will be renovated by the end of this year.

All these activities were carried out by local staff employed by SAVAMA. The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, at the University of Hamburg, jointly worked with local teams on several aspects of manuscript preservation and research and provided specialist and technical support, such as training, on-site expertise, support for the purchase and shipment of conservation materials.

Also, we have successfully been working with other partners: with the Library of Djenné, on preservation and cataloguing, with two libraries in Ségou on cataloguing and with the Ahmed Baba Institute on a research project funded by GHS.

The German donors' contribution made it possible to achieve these ambitious outcomes during the period of 2014 to 2018. Over all these year, the safeguarding of manuscripts also benefited from other international donors making the Timbuktu project a synergic endeavour built on the financial and technical support provided by many institutions. The following overall results have been achieved:

- 42,318 boxes for three hundred and 370,057 manuscripts;
- Handlists in French and Arabic of 348,000 manuscripts;
- The renovation of 34 libraries in Timbuktu, supplied with equipment;
- The digitization of 122,218 manuscripts (carried out with the support of Hill Museum & Manuscript Library).

Our big thank you goes to all the institutions who contributed towards this achievement. It is a great pleasure to see that so many of you could make it to this event! The collaborative and coordinated approach that has been put in place over these years has brought us to this remarkable success.

Perspectives

Abdel Kadef HAIDARA

Comme disait ma collègue Dr. Maria Luisa Russo, ce projet a incarné la synergie d'action entre différents partenaires dans une harmonie qui a été soutenue par le partage de l'information.

L'Allemagne a occupé la place de leader dans ce processus avec une contribution XX% sur le total des apports. Je tiens à remercier l'ensemble des parties allemandes AA, GHS, Jutta Fogel et UHH.

Je tiens également à remercier l'ensemble des partenaires associés, j'ai nommé :

- La Fondation Ford (USA)
- Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (USA)
- Le Bureau de l'UNESCO au Mali
- La Coopération Suisse au Mali
- La Fondation Prince Claus
- Le Centre JumaAlmajid (Dubai)
- Le Centre IRCICA (Turquie)
- Le Projet ML015 (Luxembourg)

Le projet a eu un impact important sur les bibliothèques, sur les détenteurs et sur l'ensemble de la communauté, au-delà de la préservation de leur patrimoine documentaire, source de fierté, le projet a permis la création de beaucoup d'emplois et a diminué le poids de la pauvreté au sein de la communauté.

Ce projet, mérite d'être célébré, aujourd'hui, par l'exemplarité de son mode de mise œuvre. Les efforts consentis durant ce projet méritent également d'être valorisé de même que les résultats obtenus. C'est pourquoi, dès maintenant, nous devons regarder vers le futur. Le futur qui nous permettra de voyager entre les lignes des manuscrits afin de les étudier, de les éditer et de les publier pour que l'humanité toute entière en tire les meilleurs profits pour son progrès.

C'est cette idée qui constitue notre vision pour les cinq ans à venir : Travailler pour l'accès universel aux manuscrits anciens et mettre en place un centre sous régional qui pourra répondre aux besoins en ressources humaines des bibliothèques et des centres de patrimoine documentaire en Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre.