

## Book Review

# The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts

**Hammer, Joshua.** *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016. 278 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4767-7740-5; 978-1-4767-7743-6 (ebook). \$26.00.

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Timbuktu, Mali, is full of surprises.

For a city that has become synonymous in modern culture with being in the middle of nowhere, Timbuktu was once the vibrant, thriving crossroads of the African continent. And contrary to the prevailing historical narrative of a sub-Saharan Africa populated by superstitious, illiterate natives, the city once housed hundreds of universities where students from as far away as the Arabian Peninsula gathered to study and learn.

But perhaps most astonishing is what has lain for centuries buried in the sand, sealed into the mud brick walls of mosques, and hidden in closets and storage rooms across the city—a vast collection of twelfth- through sixteenth-century manuscripts whose historical significance and value would rival that of any collection at a modern museum or manuscript library.

In *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts*, Joshua Hammer turns his journalistic eye towards Timbuktu. He brings readers on a somewhat disjointed journey through the centuries leading into Timbuktu's Golden Age in the 1500s—its fall and subsequent tribal warring and colonial occupation by the French—into the shifting ideological and political tides that opened the door to the 2012 jihadist coup that nearly destabilized the entire nation. This broad sweep of Timbuktu's history is framed by the story of the manuscripts, and in particular the story of Abdel Kader Haidara, the “bad-ass” librarian who masterminded a bold—and dangerous—evacuation plan to keep Timbuktu's treasured manuscripts out of the hands of Al Qaeda's jihadist rebels.

A well-known journalist with a long list of publishing credits and years of experience in Mali, Hammer begins

his book with a great deal of promise—weaving brilliant descriptions of Timbuktu's literary legacy together with Haidara's own experiences in inheriting and building that legacy. But it takes a detour after several chapters into the inner workings of Al Qaeda in Northern Mali. It quickly becomes evident that the focus of the book is not, in fact, the manuscripts or the librarians, but rather a journalistic foray into the political, religious, and military events that led to the jihadist takeover of Timbuktu, their press south towards Bamako, and the eventual intervention of French forces to regain control of the territory. Chapters drag on in a “Who's Who in Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” and long sections of the book fail to include the manuscripts in even a passing mention. But despite the fact that *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* does not live up to its sensational name, the book is not necessarily a wasted read. There are, after all, the treasured manuscripts—hundreds of thousands of them—and the pages that Hammer devotes to the story of the manuscripts' rescue and preservation are worth wading through the rest.

Revered for their content and their aesthetics, the manuscripts are a reflection of Timbuktu's medieval prosperity, wealth, and tolerance. The earliest volumes are written on delicate rag paper, although Timbuktu quickly began importing top-quality paper from Italy for its burgeoning manuscript trade (although Hammer notes that Italian paper watermarked with Christian crosses was a hard sell in the Islamic world). Filled with complex calligraphy, stunning artwork and geometric designs, and intricate illuminations—some with gold leaf—the manuscripts include works from across Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

In shining a light on the rich content preserved in the manuscripts—ranging from Islamic law, to astronomy and advanced math, to medical advice, to infertility remedies, aphrodisiacs, sexual pleasure—Hammer paints a vivid picture of peaceful Islam in Timbuktu that was often in conflict with some of the more dogmatic expressions of religion in the area. Hammer notes, “The confrontation between these two Islamic ideologies—one open and tolerant, the other inflexible and violent—would bedevil Timbuktu over the following five centuries” (ch. 2). This

confrontation would eventually reach a tipping point in 2012, leaving the massive collection vulnerable to loss and destruction. As Haidara watched the Al Qaeda occupiers patrol the city for violations of Sharia law and terrorize its citizens, one thought ran through his mind: “*They’re going to break into our libraries and steal everything inside, and destroy the manuscripts. What do we have to do to save them?*” (ch. 11).

Haidara was less Indiana Jones and more reluctant hero. His path to stewardship of Timbuktu’s manuscripts was one he initially rejected. When Haidara was 17, his father passed away and, in keeping with the tribal tradition of “generational librarianship,” he named Haidara in his will as the next family librarian—leaving him in charge of the thousands of manuscripts that had been in the family’s collection since the sixteenth century. But Haidara wasn’t interested. He wanted to pursue business and money. “What he did not want to do, he was quite sure,” writes Hammer, “was spend his days toiling in or for a library” (ch. 1).

Haidara was eventually persuaded to work for Timbuktu’s Baba Ahmed Institute as a prospector—traveling throughout the area to find and purchase manuscripts on behalf of the institute. In a short time, the manuscripts grew to become his passion, and he had single-handedly created one of the largest collections of handwritten Arabic books in the world. His own family library became an innovative preservation center, equipped with state-of-the-art tools. Haidara even began manufacturing his own acid-free paper to restore the manuscripts. The libraries drew researchers, diplomats, and tourists to Timbuktu in droves. But this renaissance was to be short-lived.

Haidara was cautious when the Al Qaeda jihadists first took control of the city, hoping that the situation would change quickly. Hammer quotes him: “Criminals, or whoever else it may be, are the least of my worries. Termites are my biggest enemies .... In my worst dreams, I see a rare text that I haven’t read being slowly eaten” (ch. 9). But it soon became clear that the manuscripts faced a greater danger. Hammer says,

He knew that many of the works epitomized the reasoned discourse and intellectual inquiry that the militants, with their rigid views of Islam, their intolerance, and their hatred of modernity and rationality wanted to destroy. It was inevitable, he was coming to believe, that the manuscripts would become a target. (ch. 12)

The manuscripts needed to leave the city for safekeeping—and Haidara set a risky evacuation plan into motion. He began purchasing metal footlockers and secretly delivering them to the city’s forty libraries so the manuscript

collections could be packed and stowed away at safe houses throughout the city, and eventually transported south to Mali’s capital, Bamako. Working against the clock, and with no funding to provide proper archival materials, volunteers stacked the manuscripts in containers with no humidity traps, no cushioning, and no boxes to protect them during transport. He asked for volunteers willing to courier the manuscripts from Timbuktu to Bamako, and ended up with hundreds—mostly teenagers, the sons and nephews of Timbuktu’s librarians.

If anyone in the story of the manuscripts’ evacuation is deserving of the title “bad-ass,” it is the young couriers who, as Hammer notes, in a low-tech operation that seemed quaintly anomalous in the second decade of the twenty first century ... transported to safety, by river and by road, past hostile jihadi guards and suspicious Malian soldiers, past bandits, attack helicopters, and other potentially lethal obstacles, almost all of Timbuktu’s 377,000 manuscripts. (ch. 18)

With so much of the manuscripts’ story focused on Haidara, it is easy to overlook the many other players involved in the rescue operation, and Hammer spends little time on the people who actually put their lives on the line to see the manuscripts to safety. While Haidara, for example, spent almost the entire evacuation in a safe house in Bamako, raising funds and directing logistics, his nephew Mohammed Touré made more than 30 round trips between Timbuktu and Bamako, personally rescuing tens of thousands of manuscripts and nearly losing his hand under Sharia law when jihadist patrols accused him of stealing the manuscripts.

In the end, not a single manuscript (or courier, or hand) was lost in transport—a remarkable feat considering that half of them were floated down the Niger River in small boats. A small number of manuscripts, which had been inaccessible to the couriers, were eventually burned when French military forces drove the jihadists from the city, but almost all had been safely relocated.

In the book’s epilogue, Hammer reunites with Haidara to see how the manuscripts are faring during their exile in Bamako. Preservation continues to be challenging, with the manuscripts susceptible to mold and fungus in Bamako’s tropical climate, and Haidara is eager to return the volumes to the drier climate of Timbuktu. But with instability still plaguing northern Mali, it seems that it may be a while before the manuscripts find their way home. In the meantime, there is a silver lining—an opportunity to catalog the entire collection for the first time, revealing to the manuscript owners and to the world at large, the incredible wealth of Timbuktu’s accumulated knowledge.

While *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is not an academic work, nor truly focused on Timbuktu's treasured manuscripts outside of their evacuation, it is a quick read and full of history, anecdotes, and details that together create a compelling portrait of Timbuktu's past and present, as well as the manuscripts' significant role in shaping the future of a nation struggling to find peace in the midst of political and ideological conflict.

## For Further Reading

Commisso, Corrie. "The Literary Refugees of Timbuktu: How a Group of Unlikely Allies Thwarted Al Qaeda and Organized One of the Most Brazen Cultural Heritage Evacuations Ever Attempted." *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* 44.2 (2015): 69–77.

Hunwick, John O., and Alida Jay Boye. *The Hidden Treasures of Timbuktu: Historic City of Islamic Africa*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2008.

From the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project Online <http://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org>.

*Timbuktu: Script and Scholarship*, prepared by the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project and Iziko Social History Collections Department (Cape Town, 2008).

*From Istanbul to Timbuktu: Ink Routes* (Cape Town: Tombouctou Manuscripts Project, 2009).

## Bionote

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