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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

Abstract: For centuries, Timbuktu, Mali, has quietly housed some of the greatest treasures of the ancient world: hundreds of thousands of scientific, literary, and religious manuscripts. But when Al Qaeda jihadists seized control of the city in the wake of a coup in 2012, the manuscripts found themselves in dire threat of destruction. To save them, a group of unlikely allies worked together to organize one of the most brazen evacuations of cultural heritage ever attempted . . . and succeeded in rescuing 95% of Timbuktu's ancient written heritage. In examining the story of the manuscripts, this article considers three areas—preparation, evacuation, and continued preservation—in which cultural heritage institutions can gain insight into the preservation of historical treasures in the midst of conflict.

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Northern Mali, May, 2012. Timbuktu, the fabled West African city, is caught in the crosshairs of civil war. At night the rumble of trucks and machine-gun fire eventually fades and the city sleeps. In the shadows of predawn, a small group of men gather in the Ahmed Baba Institute, one of Timbuktu's most celebrated cultural centers and home to more than 300,000 ancient manuscripts. One by one, they collect the priceless works, wrapping each one in soft cloth and stacking it in a metal footlocker alongside hundreds of others. The volumes are fragile and need attention, but tonight, the priority is survival: Timbuktu is under siege and manuscripts containing centuries of historical, literary, artistic, and scientific knowledge are in grave danger. Even as they close the lid of their last footlocker, the men know their job has just begun. The Ahmed Baba Institute's manuscripts represent a mere fraction of the rich cultural heritage hidden behind the mud-brick walls of the city. Hundreds of thousands more are tucked away in private homes, libraries, and mosques across Timbuktu.

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The footlockers will find their way south to safety in Mali's capital, Bamako, over the next five months—by bus, boat, donkey cart—in a brazen evacuation. Lives will be risked. Bribes will be paid. And in the end, 95% of Timbuktu's ancient written heritage—more than 300,000 manuscripts—will escape the bonfires of jihadist rebels.

Cultural Heritage in Conflict Zones: More Than Just Collateral Damage

The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then you have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is, and what it was.

—Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

The final years of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed the destruction of cultural heritage on an unprecedented scale (Teijgeler). The burning of the Sarajevo Library (1992), the tragic loss of the great Buddha statues at Bamiyan (2001), the looting of the Iraq National Museum (2003) . . . even today, cultural heritage is disappearing at an alarming rate in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries facing attacks by ISIS. As recently as a few months ago, the world watched in outrage as ISIS posted videos of their members destroying priceless artifacts of history in Mosul, Hatra, and other sites across Iraq.

Observers of history are quick to point out that cultural heritage has almost always been collateral damage in an armed conflict, whether that damage comes by way of complete loss and destruction in the course of combat or looting and theft in the aftermath of a war (Wegener and Otter).

But does “collateral damage” really define the loss of cultural heritage observed in recent years? According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, collateral damage is defined as “injury inflicted on something other than an intended

target.” While there are certainly instances in which heritage sites and artifacts are damaged simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, the proliferation of cultural heritage destruction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries seems to point to something else—a deliberate attack on the cultural identity of a people as a means of dominance (Moustafa 16). As repositories of the history, memories, and traditional knowledge of a people, cultural heritage has “the ability to help construct and enhance resilience. In this sense, heritage is far from a passive victim of destruction” (Rico 160).

This changing reality—cultural heritage as a target rather than as a victim—compels heritage workers and institutions to seriously consider their risk management and emergency-preparedness planning (Teijgeler). While emergency planning in the cultural heritage sector has traditionally focused on responding to natural disasters (floods, fire, earthquakes, etc.), little has been written on emergency planning that addresses damage prevention in the specific context of armed conflict (Moustafa 18). Using the story of the Timbuktu manuscripts as a framework for discussion, this article broadly explores three areas critical to disaster planning in conflict zones: preparation, evacuation, and continued preservation.

While the events that unfolded in Mali may seem irrelevant in a modern western society, one need only to think of 9/11 to be reminded that no country is immune to catastrophic acts of violence and destruction. Understanding the challenges and opportunities of heritage preservation in times of conflict should be an imperative for every cultural heritage institution dedicated to guarding the past for the sake of the future. Richard Kurin, undersecretary for history, art, and culture at the Smithsonian Institution, recently said in an interview,

Sometimes we think that heritage is something that belongs only to specific peoples living in specific countries. But the whole world mourned when the Bamiyan Buddhas were blown up This was quite tragic, because these Bamiyan Buddhas stood for the beliefs of hundreds of millions of people. They were poised on the historic Silk Road that united people. They were a treasure and a part of the cultural heritage of all human beings We have to do more in terms of inculcating the idea that heritage transcends any one regime or any one government. (qtd. in “World Cultural Preservation”)

The rescue of the Timbuktu manuscripts is a prime example of people from all walks of life setting aside individual agendas, pooling resources, and taking great risks to see centuries of cultural heritage safely through a civil conflict. While the story of the manuscripts is not necessarily a “best practice” example of emergency preparedness

in times of conflict, there is much to be learned from the committed group of librarians and historians, custodians and bus drivers, women and teenagers, who managed—in the midst of a violent conflict, with little training and limited financial resources—to smuggle some of the greatest treasures of the ancient world to safety under the noses of Al Qaeda rebels bent on their destruction.

A Brief History

To fully appreciate the significance of the events that transpired in Mali, one needs to have a basic understanding of Timbuktu’s past, including the events that led Mali into civil war in 2012 and placed Timbuktu at the center of the conflict.

For a city that has become synonymous with being stuck in the middle of nowhere, Timbuktu was once a thriving hub at the heart of the continental trade routes that linked West Africa to North and East Africa (Diakitè “Evacuation”). It flourished from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, renowned not only for its legendary wealth, but also for the elite Islamic scholars and judges who “wielded the book and the pen as instruments of supreme power” (Singleton 1). Timbuktu’s literary output was vast, as was the myriad of topics covered in its pages: the history of Africa and southern Europe, religion, law, mathematics; theories on the movement of stars, cures for malaria, remedies for menstrual pain (Walt). Such was the city’s reputation for its literature and book production that buying and selling books quickly became more profitable than any other commerce in Timbuktu (Diakitè “Evacuation”).

History, however, has not always been kind to Timbuktu. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Moroccan military had invaded and taken control of the city, killing or imprisoning scholars and sending the survivors into exile (Singleton 2). It was a blow from which the city never recovered. The following years of tribal and civil wars, followed by French colonization, left Timbuktu a mere shadow of what it had been in its golden age (Singleton 2).

But a significant portion of Timbuktu’s heritage survived. Hundreds of thousands of books and manuscripts were buried behind the thick mud walls of mosques and preserved by the city’s influential families for generations (Abraham 20). This “generational librarianship” continues today. The honor and responsibility of caring for the family’s ancient library is passed from parent to child, generation after generation (Diakitè “Evacuation”).

For Timbuktu and the rest of Mali, the manuscripts represent more than historical documentation. They are a tangible testament to the sophisticated intellectual heritage of

West Africa, dispelling the stereotypical notions of Africans as a superstitious, illiterate people dependent solely on oral tradition for the transmission of ideas (Ulam). Throughout Africa, Timbuktu was revered as an intellectual center, evidenced by the variations of a West African proverb still used in numerous African countries: “Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, and silver from the country of the white men. But the word of God and the treasure of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuktu” (Wiesner et al. 348).

After centuries of relative obscurity, the manuscripts found themselves on the world stage two years ago when Timbuktu became the hot seat of a civil war. In March of 2012, a coup created a political vacuum that paved the way for the Tuareg people of northern Mali, who had long argued for the establishment of an independent state, to partner with the Al Qaeda-linked Islamist group Ansar Dine and assert control over several cities in Mali’s northern territory—first and foremost, Timbuktu (Wing). In short order, Ansar Dine had abandoned their partnership with Mali’s Tuaregs and instituted their own brutal regime of Sharia law—cutting off the hands of thieves, flogging women not properly covered, and destroying the tombs of saints and other culturally significant sites around Timbuktu (Dreazen). By the time the French military inserted itself into the conflict and drove Ansar Dine back into hiding in 2013, every official building in Timbuktu had either been destroyed or desecrated (Diakité “Evacuation”).

Fortunately, not all was lost.

Preparing for a Worst-case Scenario

When the rebel militias first rolled into Timbuktu, Abdel Kader Haidara, director of the Mama Haidara Library in Timbuktu, knew he had to take action. He had spent years traveling around the country, assembling a collection of thousands of ancient texts on behalf of Timbuktu’s Ahmed Baba Institute—the city’s first organization completely dedicated to manuscript preservation—and he knew they might be at risk (Dreazen).

Haidara began planning for a worst-case scenario. Quietly, using funds from his own library, Haidara began purchasing metal footlockers and delivering them, two or three at a time, to the city’s forty libraries so the manuscript collections could be packed, often as many as 300 manuscripts to a container (Diakité “Evacuation”). Over the following three months, nearly 2,500 footlockers were bought, distributed, and packed, and then transported by mule cart in the dead of night to safe houses across the city. While Haidara hoped that the manuscripts would

remain safe in Timbuktu, the rebels’ increasing violence and reckless destruction made it clear that it was time for the manuscripts to leave Timbuktu—and fast (Hammer).

Preparation: Keeping Emergencies from Becoming Disasters

Politicians declare war and soldiers wage war. Nevertheless, what cultural institutions can do is prepare themselves for the event of war.

—René Teijgeler, “Preserving Cultural Heritage In Times of Conflict”

Conflict is unpredictable; war can rarely be anticipated. As a result, emergency preparedness in the context of armed conflict is often an afterthought—concerned with damage control rather than damage prevention (Moustafa 19).

In a 2002 study of the disaster-plan-development process of six libraries and archives in the United Kingdom, prevention was clearly identified as the key to disaster management (Muir and Shenton 122). According to the study, prevention begins with a thorough risk assessment, clearly outlined procedures and priorities, an inventory of disaster supplies, and ready contacts in conservation and repair (Muir, Shenton 116).

In a conflict zone, however, the disaster cycle is rarely predictable. Existing systems and processes often break down, resources grow scarce or disappear completely, and access to sites becomes limited (Burnham). Damage is difficult to anticipate; depending on the type of arms used in the conflict and the possibility of secondary damages (e. g., fire or flood), a wide range of contingencies is possible (Teijgeler).

Still, as we can observe in Haidara’s worst-case-scenario preparations, appropriate measures in good time can minimize damage and loss even when there is no formal disaster plan in place. Haidara’s decision to move the manuscripts to safe houses saved many of them—especially those in the collection of the Ahmed Baba Institute, which the jihadists eventually commandeered and used as headquarters and sleeping barracks (Dreazen). (The only manuscripts burned by the jihadists were housed in the area of the Ahmed Baba Institute where the rebels were sleeping [Diakité “Evacuation”]).

Planning also reduces chaos and enables administrators to make choices in advance instead of in a tense moment when their decision-making skills may be compromised. René Teijgeler, a senior cultural advisor in the Netherlands and expert in safeguarding cultural heritage, writes:

It appears that in practice, this is the most difficult part of the whole preparation strategy: deciding which part of the collection should be saved first or will require special attention. . . . Under pressure, bad choices are often made and books are grabbed randomly from the shelves in order to ‘save as many as possible.’ That is exactly why we should make plans—to prevent chaos.

Haidara’s quiet, methodical relocation of the manuscripts went completely undetected by the rebels occupying the city, buying him the time he needed to save not just “as many as possible,” but nearly all of them.

The looting of the Iraq National Museum in 2003 and the continuing loss of cultural heritage at the hands of ISIS in Syria are just two examples of cultural disasters whose stories might have ended differently with some preparation. Lawrence Rothfield, co-founder of the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago, and author of *The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum*, writes:

Had the military or the cultural heritage community invested before the war in a small amount of research and development or even some simple reflection focused on what would be needed to secure a building like the National Museum of Iraq from looters, a set of relatively cheap, portable, and easy technological fixes might have been devised.

Training for conservators and librarians is another critical component in allowing staff to develop skills necessary to respond effectively and immediately to a crisis (Muir and Shenton 122). Education in the care and conservation of the manuscripts has been a developing project in Timbuktu—the Ahmed Baba Institute partnered with the National Archives and National Library of South Africa in 2007 to train Malian craftsmen in preventative preservation methods (Cupido 55).

U.S. cultural institutions are also beginning to train heritage workers in conflict zones. The Penn Cultural Heritage Center (PennCHC) in Philadelphia, for example, recently partnered with the Smithsonian Institution to give a three-day training program for curators, heritage experts, and civilians protecting cultural heritage in Syria. The objectives of the workshop were threefold: to provide strategies for securing collections in an emergency, to provide basic supplies for packing collections, and to begin a conversation with the Syrian participants about emergency response. The PennCHC sees this training as a first step for Syria and is preparing to launch another ambitious partnership to document current conditions and future preservation needs in Syria by tracking and reporting intentional damage to and destruction of cultural heritage sites (“Emergency Support”).

Despite the uniqueness of each disaster, particularly in conflict zones, a number of common problems are apparent

in emergency situations, among them the inadequacy of disaster supplies (Muir and Shenton 121). A well-stocked emergency supply is ideal; but having such a supply is not always possible. Many conflict zones are in developing countries that are already plagued by poverty and lack of resources (Teijgeler). Haidara faced this challenge in devising a method of transporting the manuscripts: with no access to a suitable supply of humidity-proof cases and a lack of funds and time to secure them, he turned instead to a local, economical solution (Diakit , Interview). The metal footlockers were purchased locally in the markets of Timbuktu and the neighboring village of Mopti, and paid for by funds Haidara had raised for his own personal library (Hammer). While conservators might cringe at the thought of hundreds of ancient manuscripts—with minimal protection—stacked on top of each other in metal footlockers, the fact that they were stored this way made it possible for them to be quickly and efficiently evacuated when the threat became imminent.

In a conflict zone, an evaluation of local circumstances and solutions should be a guiding principle in the development of a disaster plan (Teijgeler). “Local problems need local solutions,” says Teijgeler. “All too often, solutions from developed countries are chosen to address problems in developing countries.”

There is much debate on this issue, primarily as it relates to the involvement and local impact of large international governing bodies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) (Teijgeler). Both organizations are committed to heritage preservation, UNESCO in identifying heritage at risk and setting global preservation standards, and ICBS as the “cultural Red Cross”—a liaison between preservation-support systems and urgent needs on the ground in conflict zones and natural disaster areas (United Nations; Blue Shield International). Both organizations are also committed to upholding the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflict. Developed after the massive cultural losses of World War II, the Convention requires signing countries to designate and protect cultural heritage sites from conflict (Burnham). There are few instances, however, in which the Convention has been successfully invoked as a means of protection, particularly in recent years as cultural heritage has become a more frequent target in armed conflict (Burnham). Although Syria, for example, signed the Convention in 1958, there are no procedures in place for heritage protection, and the survival of artifacts and sites is more or less a matter of chance (Burnham).

According to Lazare Ossomo, Director of UNESCO’s office in Bamako, understanding what international governing bodies like UNESCO do—and do not do—is important

for clarifying any confusion regarding the role of an international partner in heritage preservation (Interview). In Mali, for example, UNESCO's involvement in the ongoing work of heritage preservation has come in the form of mobilization, awareness, and establishing partnerships with the government of Mali and other preservation-focused non-government organizations (Ossomo). "Our role in this story was not in transporting the manuscripts from Timbuktu to Bamako," he says. "What UNESCO did was sensitize the international community to the importance of making sure this invaluable heritage was not destroyed" (Interview). In the aftermath of the conflict, UNESCO has also taken a lead role in rebuilding and restoration. The agency's assessments of the cultural damage in Timbuktu culminated in a joint action plan presented in February 2013, calling for an \$11 million investment in rehabilitation of cultural heritage damaged during the conflict, protective measures for the Timbuktu manuscripts, and cultural heritage training to ensure the future protection of Timbuktu's manuscripts and cultural heritage sites and monuments (Final Report).

While the partnership and funding opportunities that come with the involvement of an international organization should not be taken lightly, the fact that UNESCO was marginalized by the team on the ground during the evacuation underscores the suspicion and lack of trust that can exist between grassroots efforts and larger, governing bodies. According to Stephanie Diakit , a conservation expert from Seattle who played an instrumental role in the evacuation, larger organizations often lack an intimate understanding of the situation on the ground despite their good intentions. "I believe these larger international organizations have the best of intentions," says Diakit . "They just have ways of working that depersonalize the situation" (Interview). UNESCO, in fact, nearly derailed the entire rescue operation when delegates sent to Bamako began to organize a publicity campaign drawing attention to the threatened manuscripts (Diakit  "Evacuation"). Haidara quickly convinced them this was a bad idea—the jihadists had barely mentioned the manuscripts, and emphasizing their value might lead the rebels to use the manuscripts for political leverage or financial gain (Hammer). UNESCO eventually suspended the campaign.

Whether partnerships and aid come from local sources or from global influencers like UNESCO, what is clear in the story of the Timbuktu manuscripts is that major preservation operations in conflict zones cannot be successfully undertaken without help of a dedicated support network. Haidara's footlockers full of manuscripts may have been discovered and destroyed had it not been for the timely intervention of some unlikely allies.

The Manuscripts Leave Timbuktu

When Haidara realized it was time for the manuscripts to make their exodus, he immediately contacted Diakit , a long-term colleague and conservation partner. She first encountered Haidara and the Timbuktu manuscripts twenty years earlier and had since dedicated much of her time, energy, and finances to their conservation (Dreazen). She describes their relationship as "*les amis terribles*"—the terrible twosome—as they frequently debate about conservation techniques and priorities (Diakit  "Evacuation"). When it came to evacuating the manuscripts from Timbuktu, however, there was no argument. "There was socio-political conflict rising up from the south. There was ideological conflict coming down from Algeria and Lybia. The manuscripts were literally in the middle of it all," says Diakit  (Interview).

Haidara began recruiting couriers in Timbuktu while Diakit  focused on developing a financial network in Bamako, and in October of 2012, the first footlockers began their dangerous journey south to Mali's capital (Dreazen). It was a harrowing journey for the couriers, most of whom were the teenage sons and nephews of Timbuktu's library owners (Hammer). Ansar Dine controlled at least half of the road between Timbuktu and Bamako; looters and bandits surveyed the roads, looking to make a quick profit from passing vehicles; and the guards stationed at Mali's military checkpoints could be corrupt and incompetent (Dreazen, Hammer). Thousands of dollars in bribes were paid along the way, and at least once, a team of couriers was held hostage and Haidara had to negotiate for the release of the couriers and the manuscripts (Diakit  "Evacuation").

As the rescue efforts continued, ordinary Malians heard about the couriers' travels and rallied around them. Housewives provided food and shelter. Truck drivers offered rides to couriers transporting the heavy cases by foot. Entire villages staged diversions at checkpoints so the couriers could pass through unnoticed (Diakit  "Evacuation").

The evacuation of the manuscripts hit its final roadblock when the rebels, preparing to launch a massive assault on government forces to the south, closed the roads to all traffic in and out of Timbuktu (Hammer). Anticipating the coming violence, the evacuation team was forced to turn to its last-resort mode of transportation: the Niger River. Floating the ancient volumes down river aboard a fleet of *pirogues*, West African versions of canoes, was a huge risk. Most of the manuscripts were composed of loose, single-page sheets of linen paper in delicate leather bindings; the ferrous inks and gold-plated details had no binding agents to adhere them securely to

the paper—“The ink just sits on top of the paper, like it’s floating,” Diakité says (Interview). A boat taking on water could have serious consequences, turning thousands of priceless manuscripts into nothing more than a pile of rags (Diakité “Evacuation”). But the alternative—leaving the remaining manuscripts to the mercies of Ansar Dine—was even riskier, so the remaining half of the footlockers set sail for Bamako aboard a flotilla of twenty boats (Hammer).

“Every day there was a crisis—or ten—but we didn’t lose a single manuscript or a single courier and no one was hurt,” says Diakité (Interview). Call it luck, call it providence—Diakité calls it nothing short of a miracle. With 95% of the manuscripts out of harm’s way, the team had done everything in their power to preserve Timbuktu’s cultural heritage. But their task was far from over. Preservation in a new environment would present the next challenge to the manuscripts’ survival.

Evacuation: Drastic Steps for Preservation

When it comes to coordinating a large-scale evacuation of cultural heritage, there are few best-practice examples that can match the massive efforts of the museums and heritage institutions in Europe during World War II. In London, for example, the Ministry of Works engaged the city’s museums in evacuation planning as early as 1933, seven years before the war began (Ambrose). Country houses and estates outside London were identified as “safe houses,” storage rooms were constructed in museum basements, and packing trials were conducted (Ambrose.) When war finally broke out in 1939 and the museums received orders to evacuate, it took just two and a half days to relocate materials of primary importance, and by the end of the following week, more than 100 tons of books and manuscripts had been relocated as well (Ambrose).

In any kind of conflict situation in which heritage in danger must be moved, stored, or hidden, logistics can be complicated. “I had a wall in my office, about eight feet high and fourteen feet long, literally covered with Excel spreadsheets about which containers were going where, which couriers were in which places,” says Diakité (Interview). Half of the wall was used just to track phone numbers—the couriers changed their cell numbers at least three times each day, as jihadists had infiltrated Mali’s telecommunications system and were tracking phone conversations (Diakité, Interview).

While having a command center from which logistics could be managed was an important part of the successful evacuation of Timbuktu’s manuscript heritage, Haidara’s preparations were equally important. Relocating a collection requires a solid contingency plan that anticipates an evacuation, and in a conflict zone, an evacuation contingency should be a part of every disaster plan (Teijgeler).

Relocation in a conflict zone could mean simply transferring the items to a local storage facility outside the main conflict area, or, as in the case of the manuscripts, transporting them completely out of the war zone (Teijgeler). Sometimes, and especially in the absence of planning, moving the collection becomes a logistical impossibility and the only option is to find safekeeping within the existing structure: underground storerooms, closets, locked rooms in remote or unused parts of the building (Teijgeler). In the case of the Iraq National Museum, for example, the library was one of a few of rooms whose doors were reinforced by the construction of a brick wall barrier, built to deter looters and provide extra support during shelling. As a result, all of the volumes in the library were spared (al-Radi).

The least preferable evacuation involves moving the collection across borders into a neighboring country; this option could create a sensitive political situation when conflict ends and the collection is to be repatriated (Teijgeler). For this reason Haidara and Diakité were adamant about keeping the Timbuktu manuscript collection in Mali (Diakité “Evacuation”).

A timely evacuation plan laid out well in advance can often gain the support (financial and otherwise) of larger international organizations, but heritage conservators should be aware of the strings often attached to offers of aid—exhibition rights, digitization rights, etc. (Diakité “Evacuation”). The evacuation team for the Timbuktu manuscripts chose to engage a support base of smaller, more nimble organizations—including the German Embassy in Bamako, which delivered ten thousand Euros in a paper bag to support the evacuation (Diakité “Evacuation”).

Choosing organizational partnerships carefully is critical, but the importance of the partnership with people who have a vested interest in seeing their history preserved cannot be overstated. In recounting the story of the evacuation, Diakité says:

When I think about all those people, going through a terrible crisis, afraid for their lives, afraid for their futures . . . who came forward to help us save this heritage . . . I don’t even know how to qualify what that means for the manuscripts, but also for the Malian people. . . . The way the manuscripts brought people together during the evacuation leads us to believe that they, [the people] and the materials, could drive the process of enduring peace in Mali. (“Evacuation”).

This level of engagement with cultural heritage does not spring up over night. The manuscripts have been a part of Timbuktu for generations and are deeply embedded in the fabric of the Malian culture, despite the multitude of languages found in their pages (Diakit  “Evacuation”).

While UNESCO had no hand in the evacuation of the manuscripts, Ossomo also recognizes the power of a community that is highly engaged in seeing its heritage protected:

[The evacuation] was an initiative of the community, and the community should be given credit for it. What we saw during the crisis was a community deeply committed to defending its heritage. We can also see now their commitment to rebuilding. It shows that there is hope—a kind of rebirth for their region and their cities—and provides a good foundation for future peace, preservation, and reconstruction. (Interview)

The Manuscripts in Exile

The manuscripts were out of immediate danger, but their rescue was not over yet. The footlockers had been distributed in secret to houses throughout Bamako, and looked after by families who had fled to the capital when Timbuktu fell. Security, even in Bamako, was still precarious, and Haidara and his team of conservators began meeting again after dark to sort through the manuscripts (Diakit  “Evacuation”). But what they found when they opened the footlockers was yet another reason for concern.

Timbuktu’s dry, dusty climate on the edge of the Sahara Desert is a world away from that of tropical Bamako, especially in the rainy season when downpours turn Bamako’s dirt roads into rivers and dampness hangs in the air. The manuscripts were already showing signs of mold, mildew, and deterioration, and conservation quickly became top priority.

But by the end of the evacuation, funding had all but dried up and Haidara and Diakit  had exhausted much of their own personal savings (Diakit  “Evacuation”). It was time to engage a new base of supporters. Organized under the nonprofit name T160K, a nod to the first 160,000 manuscripts that escaped Timbuktu, Haidara and Diakit  launched a successful crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo.com to raise support for the conservation of the manuscripts. Between the \$70,000 raised on Indiegogo and generous donations from Talas, a New York-based supplier of preservation and conservation materials, the team was able to procure enough archival boxes and envelopes, as well as recyclable silica, to ensure that the collection could be properly cared for. Their immediate focus was what Diakit  calls “medicinal

conservation”—isolating the manuscripts with mold, mildew, insects, and other ailments that could be contagious if they were in contact with the rest of the corpus (Diakit , Interview).

With preservation efforts ongoing and the most pressing conservation needs addressed, Haidara and Diakit  could begin to think about what the future might hold for the Timbuktu manuscripts: cataloging, digitization, research. But their primary motivation, one that had been established from very beginning in Timbuktu, was to see the manuscripts safely into the last phase of their journey: the return home (Diakit , Interview).

Ongoing Preservation: Next Steps for Timbuktu’s Manuscript Collection

The dust has settled, but the story of Timbuktu’s manuscripts is far from over. Heritage restoration in the aftermath of conflict involves not only attending to physical needs, but also keeping an eye open to future possibilities.

While Haidara is eager to see the manuscripts repatriated to Timbuktu and to the families they belong to, instability still plagues the region and it may be some time before Timbuktu is safe enough to house the collection again (Diakit , Interview). With UNESCO funding the restoration of many libraries in Timbuktu, however, Ossomo says the agency hopes to see the first manuscripts, primarily those belonging to the Ahmed Baba Institute, returning to Timbuktu by the end of 2015, with the rest returning by the end of 2016 in accordance with the 4-year joint-action plan undertaken by UNESCO and the government of Mali (Interview).

If there is a positive to be found in the midst of this story, Diakit  says, it is that this is the first time the entire body of work has been together in a single location (Interview). With this kind of unprecedented access to the manuscripts, Diakit  is hopeful that the work she and Haidara embarked upon 20 years ago—integrating the knowledge in the manuscripts into the development process in Africa—can finally be realized:

The value of these manuscripts is not that they are interesting artifacts. Their value is the scholarship that they contain . . . particularly the material on governance, on peacekeeping, on women. These manuscripts have a destiny, and that destiny is to make some real positive changes in development. Our feeling is that the development process in Africa should be inspired by indigenous thought. (Interview)

Cataloging the collection is the next logical step towards seeing the manuscripts achieve this goal, but it is a massive

undertaking that will require significant funding. In the United States, much cultural funding comes from private grants, donations, and endowments. In Africa, however, private endowments are rare. Government cultural ministries typically tap public funds to support cultural heritage initiatives. “That’s why T160K is such an important part of the rebuilding process—because we can connect with financial partners in other parts of the world,” Diakité said (Interview). Although some support is still trickling in from the organizations that gave funds for the evacuation, T160K has just launched a second crowdfunding campaign to cover the cost of cataloging the collection—an estimated \$2 million (Diakité, Interview). Once the collection is cataloged, Haidara intends to work with universities and other institutions to make the collection available for research.

Innovative funding strategies and partnerships are key to maintaining preservation activities, especially after a conflict when new opportunities—cataloging the Timbuktu manuscripts, for example—may become available. The Getty Museum’s work with various heritage and cultural institutions around the world is one of a number of potential partnership models. The museum lends expertise and assistance to countries working to preserve their antiquities, and in exchange, they receive items on loan to display in their galleries (“Preserving the Past”).

Other economic models can also help with the costs of ongoing preservation. Digitization is one of the strategies being discussed for the Timbuktu manuscripts, although the volatile ferrous inks on the manuscripts require special cold-circuit photography to keep them from igniting (Diakité “Evacuation”). Haidara is currently negotiating with some major international sources to create an in-house, indigenous digitizing team. While it is not expected that establishing a paid user-rights model will cover the cost of managing the manuscripts, even a small economic benefit could generate increased local investment in the conservation (Diakité, Interview).

Creative approaches to heritage preservation often gain new ground in the aftermath of a crisis. For example, T160K is not the only organization looking at digitization to preserve and restore heritage in the aftermath of a conflict. Project Mosul, started by a group of researchers from the Initial Training Network for Digital Cultural Heritage, is proposing to use crowd-sourced imagery to create 3-D reconstructions of the artifacts destroyed by ISIS (ProjectMosul.org).

In UNESCO’s joint-action plan for the preservation of Mali’s heritage, a creative approach to preservation training targets library professionals and members of the community at large who might come in contact with or have an interest in the manuscripts: imams, masons, and private

owners of manuscripts (“Final Report”). The plan also includes opportunities for the community to reinforce cultural awareness and pride through festivals and educational opportunities (“Final Report”).

Conclusion

In the midst of the tragic loss of human life in armed conflict, cultural heritage is also at great risk . . . destroyed as collateral damage and as a means of erasing the cultural identity of a people.

Although the story of the successful preservation of the Timbuktu manuscripts is shared broadly, what might have transpired if the librarians and conservators in Timbuktu had engaged in disaster planning well in advance of the jihadist occupation? Might a stronger partnership with UNESCO or the ICBS have developed? Might fewer lives—and manuscripts—have been risked?

Still, the story carries important lessons for heritage preservation professionals and institutions. While this essay has focused on preservation in conflict zones, many of the insights gained from the story of the manuscripts can be broadly applied to developing a solid emergency plan for any disaster situation.

Clearly, preparation is the critical component in the survival of cultural heritage in an armed conflict. Having a disaster plan in place, regardless of how informal it might be, could mean the difference between a rescued statue and a pile of rubble. From the story of the manuscripts—noting in particular the stages with which Haidara’s efforts were carried out (preparing, packing, relocating, and eventually evacuating) as he worked to stay a step ahead of the jihadists—it is also clear that the unpredictable nature of preservation work in a conflict zone requires a proactive, rather than a reactive, approach that includes contingencies for evacuation and ongoing preservation work in an unfamiliar environment. Finally, since the successful evacuation of the manuscripts was the direct result of a highly engaged community, strategies for forging partnerships with community, local, and international networks should play a critical role in continued heritage preservation before, during, and after a conflict.

Compared to the human casualties of war, concern for the survival of cultural heritage may seem insignificant. But what is a culture without its heritage? If preserving culture is important during times of peace, it is perhaps even more so during times of war, when it can become a common anchor of hope for the victims of conflict and an inspiration to rise above injustice and hatred.

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