

THE
TIMBUKTU
LIBRARIES

PART IV



The state of manuscripts in Mali and efforts to preserve them

*Abdel Kader Haidara*¹

This chapter explores the state of manuscripts in Mali, specifically in Timbuktu and the adjacent region, and the history of the manuscripts from before their ‘disappearance’ (concealment) until their resurfacing. The chapter also discusses Savama-DCI (Sauvegarde et Valorisation des Manuscrits pour la Défense de la Culture Islamique), a consortium of private libraries established in 1996, which is committed to the preservation of manuscripts in Timbuktu.

The state of the manuscripts

The city of Timbuktu is an authentic and original Islamic space that illuminated the paths of knowledge² and learning for students and researchers. It is rich in the art of building, and boasts an abundant literary heritage and well-stocked manuscript libraries. There are about 408 private manuscript collections in Timbuktu and the surrounding areas (and there are other collections not included in this count).

These manuscripts reflect our civilisational legacy in general but, more specifically, our recorded and written heritage. It is a legacy filled with tremendous gifts and abundant benefits. The manuscripts carry the collective memory of our ancestors, proof of their identity, their thoughts, and a summary of their experiences. They are rich in thought and scientific content and highlight the constructive role played by our predecessors and the undeniable contributions they made to the growth of Islamic civilisation.

The manuscripts deal with all kinds of knowledge and disciplines, including the Qur’an and its sciences, Qur’anic exegesis, prophetic traditions, Islamic substantive law and source methodology in jurisprudence, theology, Sufism (gnosticism), philosophy, psychology, biology, geometry, logic, rhetoric, grammar (syntax), Arabic language, travel, geography, history, politics, arithmetic, astronomy, astrology, medicine, chemistry, physics, meteorology, botany, music, methods of teaching, biographies and

Opposite: Many of the manuscripts have been damaged by insects, neglect, moisture and inappropriate storage.



The entrance to the Mamma Haidara Manuscript Library in Timbuktu.

how to deal with disputes. They also deal with issues such as tolerance in Islam, the rights of women and children, the rights of orphans, the rights of workers, and human rights in general.

There are various kinds of documents – administrative, scientific, commercial, political; personal correspondence (letters); manuscripts on the relationship between tribes, peoples, cities and countries; *fatwas* (religious verdicts) on all issues; and so on.

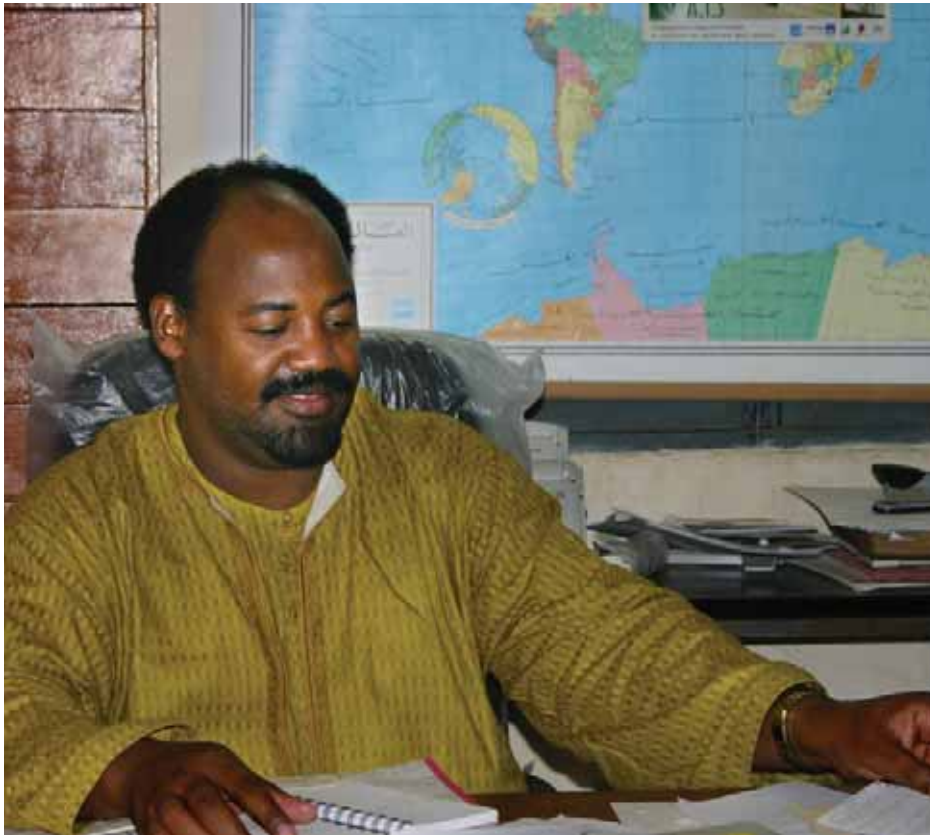
However, the manuscripts are generally in a very bad state and many have been damaged by termites and other insects, human neglect, moisture in the air, inappropriate storage methods and so on. If not for these things, the estimated number of manuscripts in Timbuktu and its surrounding areas would have been in the millions. However, according to the latest estimates, there are about one million manuscripts in Mali, distributed between state, private (owned by an individual) and family libraries and collections. For example, in counting

the manuscripts in some of the collections and libraries of the province of Timbuktu (not only the city), we found a total of 101 820 manuscripts. It is possible that a like number can be found in Ségou, Gao, Kaye, Mopti and Kidal.

The 'disappearance' of the manuscripts

There is no doubt that the manuscripts were concealed for a substantial period of time – a period that lasted a full century or more. The proof for this claim lies in the fact that no reference was made to the existence of the manuscripts by researchers who visited the region during the colonial era and thereafter. And so it was taught in schools and universities that Africa had no recorded (written) history, but only an oral tradition. However, the works of travellers who visited the area before the arrival of European colonialism mention the presence of priceless manuscripts. Ibn Battuta – the well-known traveller who visited the region in the pre-colonial era – and al-Hasan al-Wazzan (better known as Leo Africanus) – who visited the region in the seventeenth century – both spoke of the presence of manuscripts in the region of Timbuktu, and of those who worked on the manuscripts.

There are many factors that led to the 'disappearance' of the manuscripts and their subsequent reappearance. Perhaps one of the greatest causes was the clashes and



Custodian of the Mamma
Haidara Manuscript Library,
Abdel Kader Haidara.

disputes between African Islamic scholars and colonialists who, soon after their arrival, began systematically plundering the manuscripts and moving them to European cities. For example, all the manuscripts in the collection of the illustrious scholar Shaykh ‘Umar Tal (d.1865) were taken to France and are still kept there in the French National Library in Paris. The manuscripts of other scholars were moved to different European capitals and major cities. Because of these developments, African Islamic scholars began to hide whatever manuscripts they had. Some placed the manuscripts in leather bags and buried them in holes; others left them in abandoned caves in the desert; and yet others sealed up the doors of their libraries with mud to conceal them.

Reasons for the reappearance of the manuscripts

With the end of colonialism, the people of the region turned their attention to the hidden and buried manuscripts. In 1964 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation held an international conference in Timbuktu to discuss the issue of African world heritage. They turned their attention to the African manuscripts and agreed on the establishment of various centres: the Institut Fondamental de l’Afrique Noire (IFAN) Dakar; a centre for researching, collating and recording oral history narratives in Niamey, the capital city of the Republic of Niger; and another centre for the search and preservation of old manuscripts based in the Malian city of Timbuktu.



Many small private collections of manuscripts are kept in homes in and around Timbuktu. Stored in trunks or cupboards, these precious family treasures are very vulnerable to decay.

As a result of this, the Ahmed Baba Institute – adopting the name of Ahmad Baba al-Sudani al-Timbukti, one of Timbuktu's greatest scholars during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – was opened in Timbuktu in 1973 (see Chapter 20 for more on the Ahmed Baba Institute). The staff at the Institute conducted awareness campaigns and encouraged people to bring out the manuscripts they and their forebears had concealed. They assured people that their reasons for collecting the manuscripts were to protect and preserve them from theft and further plundering. They also assured the owners that the manuscripts would remain under their control should they want to benefit from them in reading or doing research. In this manner the collection of some manuscripts was gradually undertaken and completed, thanks to the efforts of – and huge costs borne by – the Ahmed Baba Institute and its staff.

In spite of these tremendous efforts, though, most of the manuscripts were collected only after 1991. This coincided with the election of a new government that returned to the citizens their democratic rights, among which was the right to establish foundations, companies and private societies. Owners of manuscripts grabbed the opportunity and established a society for the preservation and evaluation of these manuscripts. Another awareness campaign was launched, explaining the scientific and civilisational value of the manuscripts and urging people to hand them over to the public manuscript library, the Ahmed Baba Institute.

The first private library to open its doors to the public was the Mamma Haidara Library, which obtained funding from the Andrew Mellon Foundation in New York. After this many other private libraries opened their doors. Today Timbuktu has 21 private libraries and many manuscripts are seeing the light after their concealment under the ground.

Savama-DCI

Savama-DCI, a non-governmental organisation based in Timbuktu, was established in 1996 for the protection and evaluation of manuscripts in defence of Islamic heritage. It entered into a contract with the Malian government in 2005. A partnership with the Ministry of Culture resulted in the construction of a general library made up of a number of smaller libraries in the city of Jenne. The ministry has financed the construction of this library, which commenced in 2005.

Savama-DCI has also signed an agreement with the Ford Foundation, which by the time of writing had committed itself to donating more than half a million US dollars for the period 2005–08. With this monetary assistance, three private libraries have been established and/or renovated:

- ❖ the Mamma Haidara Library (renovations);
- ❖ the Imam al-Suyuti Library, situated next to the Jingere-Ber Mosque;
- ❖ the Wangari Library.

All three libraries were inaugurated in April 2006. Savama-DCI has additionally pledged to achieve the following by the end of 2007:

- ❖ indexing (cataloguing) the information in 500 manuscripts from each of the 3 libraries;
- ❖ conserving and preserving 500 manuscripts from each of the 3 libraries;
- ❖ training youth in the art of indexing;
- ❖ training about 50 women in the art of conserving manuscripts;
- ❖ continuing the search for manuscripts in remaining private collections;
- ❖ translating 10 manuscripts on topics such as dealing with wars, tolerance in Islam and women's rights;
- ❖ organising an international meeting in Timbuktu on the African manuscripts at the end of 2008.

All of these activities have been made possible by virtue of funding from the Ford Foundation.

NOTES

1 Translated from Arabic by Mohamed Shaid Mathee.

2 Translator's note: I translate the Arabic word *'ilm* as 'knowledge' instead of 'science' so as not to give the impression that natural science (physics and chemistry) or social science – as they are defined in modern universities – was meant.

