

The private libraries of Timbuktu

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The creation of private libraries is a relatively new phenomenon in the cultural life of Timbuktu. Libraries in the modern sense of the word are places where anyone can go to consult books, in this case manuscripts, open to the general public. The Timbuktu libraries are probably better referred to as private collections gathered by individuals or families who use them for educational purposes or their own private reading.

Since 1996, however, 21 of Timbuktu's private collections have been opened to the public (listed in Table 1). This number does not include libraries outside the city limits and there are many important ones, such as those in Arawan and Bujbeha in the Sahara Desert, and those located along the river in Diré.

Within Timbuktu, the Sankore district has eight libraries (38%); Badjindé has seven (33%); Sareikayna and Sareyk have four (19%) and Jingarey-Ber has two (9%). Thus, of the seven administrative areas of the city, four contain private libraries and essentially the libraries are concentrated in the old sections of the city.

No one has yet researched the emergence of private collections over time, but a study of this kind would begin to explain their location in the older parts of Timbuktu as they proliferated between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. As early as the second half of the sixteenth century Ahmad Baba (and Moroccan and Spanish authors) began to mention the existence of these private collections. The *tarikhs* of the seventeenth century mention the purchase of manuscripts by different scholars, as well as copies of manuscripts commissioned by the *askiyas* for scholars in Timbuktu. Many of those opening their libraries today are descendants of these scholars.

The first private library was opened to the public in Timbuktu in the twentieth century by a Moroccan bibliophile called Ahmad Boularaf. He was born in about 1864 in Morocco, and first lived in Shinqit in Mauritania. He opened his library in Timbuktu in about 1907 and employed transcribers to copy the manuscripts that enriched his

Opposite: Ismaël Diadié Haidara, custodian of the Fondo Ka'ti Library.

Table 1 Private libraries in Timbuktu

Family custodian	Name of library	Location
Imam al-Aqib	Sankore Mosque	Sankore
Adil Muhammad Mahmud	Qadi Muhammad Mahmud	Sankore
Mahmud M Dedeou	Cheihkna Bulher	Sankore
Sidi al-Wafi	Qadi M Ahmad Baber	Sankore
San Chirfi Alfa	Alfa Salum	Sankore
Mahmud Alfa	Alfa Ibrahim	Sankore
Sidi Lamine	Sidi Gumo	Sankore
Mahamane Arbijé	Alfa Baba	Sankore
Imam Hasey/Mukhtar	al-Wangari	Bajindé
Hamdi Salum	Boularaf	Bajindé
Baba Sidi Baba	Qadi Ahmad Baba II	Bajindé
Chirfi	Mawlana Abdalrahman	Bajindé
Sumayla Hammu	Hammu	Bajindé
Abdalrahman Haman	Alfa Haman Sidi	Bajindé
Alfadi Ahmed Bano	Ahmed Bano	Bajindé
Imam Sidi Alfa Umar	Alfa Umar	Sareikeyna
Abdel Kader Haidara	Mamma Haidara	Sareikeyna
Ismaël Diadié Haidara	Fondo Ka'ti	Sareikeyna
Abdelhamid Maiga	Cheibani Maiga	Sareikeyna
Imam Soyuti/Sane	Jingere-Ber Mosque	Jingere-Ber
Imam Suyuti	Suyuti	Jingere-Ber

collection. In 1945, Boularaf's collection consisted of 2 076 manuscripts but by 2002 this number had dwindled to 680, as many of the manuscripts were donated to the Ahmed Baba Institute, a public library owned by the Malian government. When the owners of other private collections saw the decline of the Boularaf Library, they decided to open their private libraries to the public.

Of the 21 libraries listed in Table 1, only five are easily accessible to the public. These five libraries collectively house just over 20 000 manuscripts (see Table 2) and they generally experience similar problems around preservation.

Table 2 Private libraries easily accessible to the public

Library	Opened	Approx no. of manuscripts
Mamma Haidara	1996	9 000
Fondo Ka'ti	1999	7 026
al-Wangari	2003	3 000
Imam Soyuti	2004	800
Jingere-Ber	2004	500

Damage to manuscripts

Factors that result in damage to manuscripts include environmental factors, the components of paper and ink, and human greed, neglect or ignorance.

A technical study of buildings in Timbuktu would have to be done for an accurate picture to be given of the environmental factors involved in preserving manuscripts in this city. The private libraries are often housed in rooms that are exposed to the same environmental factors as any other building in Timbuktu, such as dust, light, highly variable climatic conditions and space constraints. The manuscripts are usually stored in tin trunks or on low tables called *koma*. These storage methods crush the manuscripts, prevent air from circulating between them, and promote the development of micro-organisms, including moulds and bacteria. Dust is one of the most significant causes of damage.

With the electrification of Timbuktu, the population rapidly moved from using oil lamps to gas lamps, and then to electric lamps. There has also been a shift from using fibre bulbs to neon bulbs, which consume less electricity but which contribute more actively to the discolouration of paper and ink.

Without an analysis of Timbuktu's rainfall levels combined with its temperature gradients it is impossible to accurately determine the effects of the climate on manuscripts. However, on average, during winter, the temperature oscillates between 5 and 12°C, and in summer it is between 45 and 52°C. The average difference in temperature between seasons is thus about 40 degrees, which obviously impacts on the manuscripts. Hot, dry air makes the manuscripts brittle, causing them to disintegrate, and the short rainy season causes humidity, which promotes moulds and bacteria. Other environmental factors that damage the manuscripts include pollution, floods, fires, earthquakes and the collapse of houses.

The materials from which the manuscripts are made are another source of deterioration and make their preservation problematic. In the private libraries of Timbuktu,

manuscripts are generally made of parchment and paper. As far as I am aware, there is only one Qur'an from the twelfth century, which is made of vellum. Manuscripts dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries are in better condition since paper was then made using linen and cotton fibres. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the quality of the paper declined considerably. Chemical elements used for bleaching the paper and acidic gumming methods have accelerated the chemical degradation of paper, which becomes brittle, yellow and acidic. Many of the Timbuktu manuscripts are from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and electronic pH measuring, as well as urgent de-acidification, has become necessary.

The ink used, mainly from the sixteenth century, was often metal based. Moisture has increased the ink's acidity levels and caused the ferrous content to damage the paper. In some cases, ink has eaten deep into the paper, the text has become illegible and the fragile paper has disintegrated.

Elements to be taken into consideration when examining the human factors responsible for the deterioration of the collections of manuscripts, and the manuscripts themselves, include:

- ❖ the closure of many libraries due to political reasons;
- ❖ dispersion of manuscripts/libraries' contents through inheritance;
- ❖ mishandling of manuscripts;
- ❖ unsuitable storage methods, for example when manuscripts are piled up in chests;
- ❖ theft of manuscripts for resale on the black market;
- ❖ breaking up manuscripts into separate sections;
- ❖ owners throwing away or destroying damaged manuscripts.

The factors discussed above have been largely responsible for the destruction of manuscripts in private collections in Timbuktu. If these manuscripts are to be preserved, the following conditions will have to be met: suitable buildings need to be constructed to house the manuscripts and equipped with restoration, digitisation and storage facilities; the manuscripts must be restored and digitised; and catalogues of each library's manuscripts must be compiled and published.

The Fondo Ka'ti Library

What is today the Fondo Ka'ti Library was begun when the Islamicised Visigoth Ali b. Ziyad al-Kunti left Toledo in Spain in 1469. He went into exile with a sizeable collection of manuscripts, and ended up in Goumbou, in the Soninké region of present-day Mali. The collection was enriched in Goumbou with the manuscripts of Askiya Muhammad and Alfa Kati Mahmud b. Ali b. Ziyad (d.1593). Ismael b. Alfa Kati then took charge of the collection in Tindirma, until 1612. The manuscripts were then moved to Bina, under the guardianship of Mahmud Kati II (d.1648), and after that the

collection was passed on to his son, Mahmud Kati III, and moved to Goumdam. The collection was then passed on to Ali Gao, then to Mahmud Abana b. Ali b. Mahmud Kati II and finally to Alfa Ibrahim b. Ali Gao b. Mahmud Kati III, under whose guardianship the library was dispersed. In 1999 the collection was brought together again, and manuscripts, which had been dispersed among the different branches of the family who lived in various villages along the Niger River, were brought to Timbuktu.

There are 7 028 manuscripts in this collection which represents the whole compendium of medieval Islamic knowledge: Qur'an and Qur'anic traditions; law and the foundations of the law; theology and mysticism; history and genealogy; philology and grammar; logic and philosophy; poetry and metre; astronomy and astrology; medicine and pharmacopoeia; and mathematics and physics. Some of the manuscripts are juridical consultations or juridical Acts dealing with a variety of subjects such as: the life of the Jews and Christian renegades in Timbuktu; the sale and freeing of slaves; marriage and divorce; coinage and its uses; the commerce of books, salt, gold, fabrics, cereals, spices and cola nuts. Others are letters from rulers or merchants from both sides of the Sahara.

Many of the foundational works are annotated by the learned men of Cordova and Granada, Fez and Marrakesh, Qayrawan and Tripoli, Cairo and Baghdad. Others are put into verse and annotated by the learned men of Timbuktu, Jenne, Shinqit, Wadan and Walata. Many of the manuscripts are signed or annotated by Mahmud Ka'ti or his descendants.

Many of the manuscripts contain watermarks which identify the origin of the paper. Calligraphic styles range from Andalusí, Maghribi, Saharaoui, Suki, Sudani and Sharqui scripts. Their formats vary from 6 to 7 centimetres or 22 to 29 centimetres and many are covered in tooled leather. They date from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries.

Today the manuscripts are generally in quite bad condition due to the multiple factors discussed earlier. The conservation of the manuscripts is imperative and will hopefully be achieved soon through restoration and digitisation. There are also plans for the publication of the library's catalogue.

NOTE

1 Translated from French by Davina Eisenberg.

