

PRESERVATION OF ENDANGERED ARCHIVES: A CASE OF TIMBUKTU MANUSCRIPTS

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Abstract

This study seeks to discuss the preservation of archives with a focus on those that are constantly exposed to various threats such as the ancient manuscripts of Timbuktu, an ancient city found in the North of Mali in West Africa. The paper will share my experiences working on Timbuktu's ancient manuscripts and some of the findings in my Master of Science Degree in Archives and Records Management research titled "Preserving Ancient Manuscripts in Hostile Environments, with Reference to The Preservation of the Ancient Manuscripts of Timbuktu".¹ Traditional methods of preservation have been employed in Timbuktu from the 13th century which is why these manuscripts have survived till today. The study examines the currently accepted international standards and practices used in the preservation of library and archive material and how these fare against the challenges faced by the ancient manuscripts of Timbuktu. The use of the Timbuktu manuscripts serves as the worst case scenario that can assist in the better understanding of the unique preservation challenges facing the documentary heritage in Africa and other developing countries.

¹ This research was done to fulfil the requirements for the completion of the Master of Science Degree in Archives and Records Management with the University of Dundee in Scotland in 2015.

The reality that war has become the worst threat to archives and other cultural heritage must be acknowledged. No one has an answer to how preservation of heritage can be done amidst raging wars and terrorism. The unpredictable nature of terrorism makes it difficult to prepare for it. The nature of war is also changing. In South Africa, demonstrations raged at institutions of higher learning and communities in 2017. Burning of heritage monuments, libraries, schools and destruction of other property has become a common occurrence during protest actions. The paper concludes by identifying the causes of unrest and indicates how archives can be vulnerable.

Keywords: endangered archives, Timbuktu, preservation, manuscripts

1. Introduction

On the 10 November 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted the Universal Declaration on Archives which was developed and adopted by the International Council on Archives during their annual conference in Oslo in September 2010 (ICA 2010). The declaration provides a collective commitment by member states who have committed to the improvement in the management, resourcing and capacitation of these archives against the inherent threats stemming from their irreplaceability, uniqueness and their contribution to accountability. This commitment came at a better time when wars, natural disasters, regional conflicts, ethnic clashes and aggressive economic battles are the order of the day. A collective mobilisation of resources and interventions such as has been seen in Mali after the 2012² conflict in the northern region demonstrated how the Universal Declaration on Archives could be invoked.

² In 2012 the Tuaregs in Northern Mali rebelled against the Malian government taking advantage of the ousting of President Amadou Toumani Touré by the military who were unhappy with the way the government was handling the rebel crisis in the north. The rebels were demanding independence for the northern region of Mali, known as Azawad.

Since the beginning of time human memory has been the foundation from which life's improvement has been based. Memory provides the warning of past mistakes and guides the current behaviour and lays the basis for planning for the future. However, due to the fact that different people can give a different version of the same event makes the human memory less reliable. These disparities may be as a result of ageing, bias, misinterpretation and also the desire to intentionally misrepresent the truth. Eliminating the total reliance on human memory alone has been one of the benefits of the introduction and improvement in recordkeeping processes. However, over the years, it has become apparent that even recorded information may not be as reliable and is also subject to alteration, misinterpretation or destruction, hence the continued efforts to improve recordkeeping standards and principles.

Archives have gained respect in their acceptance as the best sources of information to past events. Various principles have been developed to ensure that the process of recording official information ensures credibility, reliability, trustworthiness, and correctness, thereby removing reliance on the record alone. Therefore, reliability is provided to a record by its form and procedure of creation (Duranti 1995). The challenges facing the world currently breeds an environment where misrepresentation of the true facts is beginning to jeopardise progress made in trying to ensure acceptance of archival records as authentic and being what they purport to be. The propaganda machinery is at play to skew the truth for whatever reasons suits those who do not need the truth to be out there. For example, warring sides and governments have shifted from initially trying to block social media to them using these platforms to drive their propaganda machinery.

2. Archives defined

George Santayana sometimes referred to as the “man of letters” once wrote “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” and went on further to say “only the dead have seen the end of war” (Santayana 1863-1952). This observation by Santayana gives importance to the power of the written word and its effectiveness as a tool for capturing memory. It also implies that without memory there would be no basis for change, and development could just be a repeat of past mistakes. In his keynote address for the 37th International Conference of the Round Table on Archives (CITRA) Conference in Cape Town on the 21st of October 2003 Arch Bishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu ended by saying “*we must remember our past so that we do not repeat it.*”³ This is why in the final report of the TRC, the recommendation was that the records of the commission must be deposited for permanent storage at the National Archives even though they were not yet twenty years old (normally referred to as A20 records⁴) records as prescribed by the National Archives and Records Service Act No. 43 of 1996 (as amended by Cultural Laws Amendment Act 36 of 2001). By having these records deposited with the National Archives the intention was to ensure they will be secure and will receive the best possible form of preservation. Archives are an ensemble of historical primary source material used either as verification that certain transactions took place, that the creators existed or that the subject matter was handled by the organisation when, where and how⁵. The Society of American

³ Archives and Human Rights – Transcription of Speech by Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the 37th Annual Citra Conference: 21 October 2003 – <http://www.ica.org/3715/reference-documents/archbishop-desmond-tutu-keynote-capetown-south-africa-21-october-2003.html> (accessed 2 Nov. 2016)

⁴ Section 11 (2) of the National Archives and Records Service Act No. 43 of 1996 (as amended) refers to records that have been identified in a disposal authority as having enduring value must be transferred to a repository after they have been in existence for twenty years. These records are referred to as A20 records.

⁵ Motsi, Alexio (2015). MSc Records Management Thesis: Preserving Ancient Manuscripts in Hostile Environments – With Reference to the preservation of the Ancient Manuscripts of Timbuktu, University of Dundee Centre for Archives and Information Studies.

Archivists define archives as “Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control; permanent records.”⁶ One notices the broadening of the definition by reference to “materials” instead of records in the SAA definition above.

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act (NARSSA) defines archives as “records in the custody of an archives repository.” When one goes to the definition of *archives repository* the Act describes it as any archives repository contemplated under section 11 of the Act (National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, 2001). Unfortunately, section 11 does not provide further definition of a repository or an archive. This lack of clarity leaves a lot of room for misinterpretation and confusion. Thrown in the midst of this confusion is the electronic records phenomenon. While the NARSSA Act prescribes that public records must be transferred to an archival repository 20 years after their creation, electronic records age faster and the environment in which they are created, managed and used also has a very short lifespan. For years, there have been debates of whether there is a need to separate the records manager from the archivist but with the advent of electronic records comes the IT dimension that has created many difficulties for the traditional records manager or archivist because it is generally claimed that IT does not follow records management rules. Archiving in the electronic environment has its own principles and processes that may differ to those in the paper environment.

⁶ A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology –
<http://files.archivists.org/pubs/free/SAA-Glossary-2005.pdf>

3. Archives as memory

Archives provide records of past activities of nations and societies that can assist in defining their identity. Some refer to archives as collective memory. According to SimplyPsychology.org, memory has three stages: encoding, storage and retrieval. Encoding involves visual, acoustic and semantic. Records also have the same stages or phases during their lifecycle which starts by recording, preserving and retrieval (Schellenberg, 1956). The only difference is that archives would have been physically recorded while memory may be dwelling in people's minds and its accuracy may depend on the individual's ability to recall the information correctly. Oral historians have been debating the issue of validation. Some people think oral testimonies cannot be relied upon unless there is some legitimate validation processes that gives the information some level of correctness.

Storage involves the ability to store the encoded information for future retrieval (McLeod, 2007). Memory storage depends on the ability to store memory in the short or long term. However, there may be certain influences that impact the accurate decoding of that memory when required. These could be factors such as cultural norms, religious norms, and even intentional misrepresentation of facts. Retrieval of memory is the process of recalling the stored memory. When people's ability to recall things has been affected, it means they cannot remember the stored memory. Just like storage, retrieval can be affected by certain factors such as trauma, fear, and many other mental or psychological conditions that affect the memory. Ironically the same applies to written information. Access can be hampered by obsolescence, fading of texts, deterioration of information carriers etc.

It is often true to assume that an organisation that follows proper recordkeeping procedures enjoys success (Tagbator, Adzino, & Agbanu., 2015). This is because the process of recordkeeping encourages honesty, transparency, accountability and good governance. Just by maintaining a good recordkeeping system organisations are forced to apply other strategies such as risk management, business continuity, monitoring and evaluation, and proper strategic planning. Even auditing relies on records for verification and evidence. Therefore, an organisation that realises that its records form part of its organisational assets and are drivers to their business functions will always have a good chance of success and sustainability.

Social amnesia is a challenge where groups of people are forced to forget the past either by repression, ignorance, changing circumstances or through changing interests (Akussah, 2011). In today's global trends, politics and economies one element that can prompt social amnesia is propaganda. Propaganda machines are becoming more sophisticated and proactive to such an extent that the recipients of the information may not be able to detect whether information is legitimate or not. Only when archival records start surfacing can people realise that they have been misinformed. Social amnesia can be by design or an outcome of traumatised society that wishes to forget the painful or difficult pasts. It is in these instances where archives can serve as the most reliable records of these events. Still there are instances where the facts in the documentation can be distorted to suit some skewed agenda that seeks to permanently alter the truth. In such cases, issues such as oral history becomes one of the interventions to help fill the gaps.

4. Value of archives

The value of archives tends to change over time. Once the purpose for which the records have been created by the creating agency has been fulfilled, the record's value may evolve to that which is determined by those using it for research purposes. Within the records lifecycle model, the record moves through space and time as determined by the various stages in this cyclical life. Unfortunately, many records creators only care for the record when it is still current and can still serve the purpose for which it was created. Once that purpose is served, the record is shifted to a semi-current state where it gradually fades into the backrooms and cupboards (Bettington, Eberhard, Loo, & Smith, 2008).

Very often the cost of caring for records start to become an issue when the creating agency does not require the record for day to day activities.⁷ The existence of national archival institutions is to try and provide a dedicated entity that will be resourced with the necessary

⁷ The author has been involved in inspections of records storage for government departments in South Africa and the general trend is that records that are no longer needed (non-current) are pushed to the back rooms. Sometimes these records are stored in garages or basements where they are exposed to damaging factors such as fire, flooding, pets and neglect.

capacity and infrastructure to manage these historical records. Laws have been put in place to assist in mandating these very relevant agencies to look after the collective memory of nations.

Archives provide the basis for research. All professional disciplines rely on historical information to guide their research in finding new ways of doing things. Politics, medicine, culture, science, etc. all base their research on new knowledge on historical information. Going back to what Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu said, it is clear that if there was no means of capturing our memory, we would continue moving in circles.

It is always a privilege to work in an archival institution. Unfortunately, one does not often have the time to immerse oneself in the rich historical accounts contained in these collections. It is often very difficult to publicise archives to anyone as compared to libraries where people can go and borrow books and return them after a given period⁸. One is always at pains to think about ways to take the archives to the people without further endangering them. By their irreplaceable nature, coupled with their legal status archives have to be used within a closed access system to avoid them being lost. The challenge has been and will always be about how do we bring our archives to the people?

5. Threats to archives

What do we mean by endangered archives? In 1996 UNESCO conducted an audit of libraries and archives lost in the 20th century. The report identified the main causes of loss of archives as: carelessness, accidental fires, arson, cyclones, pillage, shelling and air attacks, external and in-house flooding. It is now 22 years since this report was produced and many more archival collections have been lost to wars, natural and man-made disasters, theft etc. The

⁸ Custodians of archival material prefer to have these records accessed onsite. This is mostly to do with the uniqueness and legal value of archives and the risk of complete loss of these irreplaceable records.

report was meant to highlight the need for a global approach to protecting archives and libraries.

According to the Memory of the World Programme (MoW)

“Documentary heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear for ever”⁹.

And in terms of the British Library’s Endangered Archives Programme”

“As more and more of the world embraces the industrial and technological revolution, and as the pace of globalisation accelerates, the remaining evidence of pre-industrial societies, their history and culture, is fast being discarded.”¹⁰

Archives are produced by people for personal, organisations, societal and even universal purposes. The processes of producing these records can be through acquisition or by creation. The contexts under which records are created and their material composition determines the risks that they will be subjected to. The environment under which information is produced can be political, social or economic in nature. Regulatory requirements of these environments determine the information produced or collected and how this information must be managed. When conducting information risk analysis, it is very important to take these aspects into account in order to develop and adopt appropriate control and response measures. The following are the major threats to archives:

- Their inherent nature – material used ages naturally. Paper and other information carriers age with time but this is

⁹ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/about-the-programme/>

¹⁰ The Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) is a programme run by the British Library aimed at preserving material that is danger of destruction, neglect or physical deterioration world-wide. The programme works through the awarding of grants to qualifying collections to assist in their preservation , relocation to appropriate and safer locations and/or digitisation to create backups - <http://eap.bl.uk/>

accelerated by the use of non-archival paper or material. Most mass produced paper is made from wood pulp which naturally ages. The same applies to film and photographic material which also ages with time. Due to limited resources, the conditions under which archival material is stored are not controlled thereby affecting the stability of the records.

- The context under which they were created – records may contain information that some people may not want to see being exposed. For example before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission commenced its work in 1996 some security establishments destroyed a lot of security records.¹¹
- The social dynamics – Genocides have been reported in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi and many other countries aimed at wiping out any traces of existence of particular groups of people. Part of these systematic atrocities is that evidence of existence of the targeted groups also is also destroyed. Xenophobia, racism, tribalism and ethnicity are some of the issues driving what is usually termed as ethnic cleansing. This can lead to social amnesia discussed earlier (Paper Genocide).
- Political dynamics – intentional destruction or theft of records to cover up maladministration or to expose such depending on who tends to benefit the most. Political propaganda has become one of the major threats to archives and records because it is designed to systematically

¹¹ The apartheid government destroyed all records they felt carried incriminating information. – source

<http://sabcrc.saha.org.za/reports/volume1/chapter8/subsection11.htm>

<https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02167/04lv02264/05lv02335/06lv02357/07lv02359/08lv02367.htm>

misinform targeted audience to achieve specific political agendas.

- Geographical position - the location where archives are kept can be a major risk because of the potential of natural disasters such as tornadoes, earthquakes, flooding, hurricanes, volcanoes, extreme temperatures, and even wars. The only solution for the communities living in these endangered zones is that they have to evacuate and relocate. Unfortunately, this is not an easy undertaking because it creates new problems such as where would the people be resettled, or are they communities happy to move from the land of their ancestors. There are instances that some communities who live in these areas attach their cultural belief systems to these very same dangers.¹²
- Climate – This includes but not limited to harsh weather conditions such as droughts, floods, tsunamis, heat waves, etc.
- Neglect – this is the most common challenge. Many of these institutions are failing in implementing their mandatory obligations due to various reasons ranging from budget constraints, misaligned programmes and lack of expertise and interest. Archives in general have been neglected in terms of funding as they compete for resources with other more humanitarian priorities such as eradication of hunger, improvement of health service, education and security. Due to lack of understanding exacerbated by the poor marketing programmes people do not appreciate the relevance of archives in terms of their contribution to improving humanitarian priorities. Neglect can be through abandonment, or intentional neglect.

¹² There are communities who believe volcanoes, earthquakes, drought, harsh weather conditions or even pest invasions are punishment from the ancestors. These people would therefore not leave the land of their ancestors and are prepared to die than to leave.

In South Africa there is an increase in risks associated with arson and civil action. The events experienced by the country recently indicates to us that we are not immune to such events as happened in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Mali and other countries that have faced uprisings, contracted civil unrest and terrorist activities. The burning of Schools in Limpopo earlier in the year, the damage to cultural heritage during the #FeesMustFall¹³ campaigns and others emphasise how things can easily get out of hand. The following questions are important for us to answer if we are to ensure our archives are safe, accessible and benefiting society:

- How prepared are we to ensure the collective memory of society is not lost?
- What have we done to preserve and protect what we already have in our custody as archives?
- What are we doing to ensure that which is not yet in our custody is protected?
- Is there collaboration amongst those in the archival space so as to share resources, expertise, knowledge and information?
- How do we respond when archives are under threat?
- Do we have a national plan to deal with disasters for archives?
- Have we properly defined what archives are in the South African context?
- What role does society play in ensuring our archives are safe?
- Are the lines of responsibility clarified?

6. Example of interventions

Various efforts have been undertaken to make sure cultural heritage is not destroyed. In 1954 during the Hague Convention, the *Convention of the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* was adopted and this led to the eventual creation of

¹³ The #FeesMustFall is a campaign by university students that started in October 2016 and is demanding free tertiary education in South Africa.

the Blue Shield¹⁴ in 1996. The Blue Shield is a protective symbol equivalent to the Red Cross but specifically focussing on cultural property during armed conflict. The programme requires for regional and national committees of the Blue Shield. Member states are required to respect the Blue Shield by protecting any such cultural property carrying this symbol.

The Universal Declaration on Archives sought to provide a common and collective commitment by countries by ensuring the prioritisation of archives in their programmes. The declaration committed member states to work collectively to make sure:

- Appropriate national archival policies and laws are adopted and enforced;
- The management of archives is valued and carried out competently by all bodies, private or public, which create and use records in the course of conducting their business;
- Adequate resources are allocated to support the proper management of archives, including the employment of trained professionals;
- Archives are managed and preserved in ways that ensure their authenticity, reliability, integrity and usability;
- Archives are made accessible to everyone, while respecting the pertinent laws and the rights of individuals, creators, owners and users;
- Archives are used to contribute to the promotion of responsible citizenship.

The Memory of the World Programme¹⁵ was established by UNESCO in 1992 to address the chronic loss of historically

¹⁴ The Blue Shield is a protective symbol adopted the 1954 Hague Convention a treaty focussing on the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts. In 1956 the International Committee of the Blue Shield was created with representative from the International Council on Archives, International Council of Museums, International Council on Museums and Sites, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and the Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations.

¹⁵ The Memory of the World Programme is a UNESCO initiative to safeguard documentary heritage of humanity against neglect, ageing, climate, wilful damage

significant documentary heritage across the world. The programme works with stakeholders such as IFLA¹⁶, ICA¹⁷ and manages a register of historically significant collections to safeguard their preservation and create awareness to augment access. The programme operates at international, regional and national levels with commissions elected to serve on these levels.

An earlier intervention that took place after World War II was when a group of experts undertook to search, recover and repatriate cultural artefacts that had been looted by the German retreating army. This group of experts commonly known as the Monuments Men comprised of curators, museum directors and archivists amongst others risked their lives to undertake such a life-threatening undertaking in hostile territories with very little support and resources. What is very interesting here is the clear strategy used by the Nazis to remove any sense of identity from its enemies by taking that which gave them a sense of identity. It is also clear that the plundering of cultural heritage was part of a grand idea of world domination which was the main motivation for Hitler and his army (Edsel, 2009).

Another intervention is the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme¹⁸. This programme seeks to assist (through awarding of grants to qualifying collections) for their preservation. The grant can be used for digitisation, production of backup copies, and relocation of the collections to safer and conducive environments or locations. This programme also seeks to develop capacity to the recipient countries or institutions and recognises issues such as copyright and the need to keep the collections in their countries of origin.

There are many other such interventions that operate at national, regional and international levels. One of the most common aspects is

and collective amnesia, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/about-the-programme/>

¹⁶ The International Federation of Library Associations

¹⁷ International Council on Archives

¹⁸ <https://eap.bl.uk/>

the growing recognition of the threats caused by conflicts whose effects go beyond national borders into regional or even international levels. Whether it is the war in Syria, natural disasters in Italy or humanitarian issues such as in Libya; the effects of these are felt at regional or international level. Organisations such as International Council on Archives (ICA), International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) have been working tirelessly to ensure the protection and preservation of cultural heritage.

7. Endangered Timbuktu manuscripts

The Timbuktu manuscripts have suffered from most of the challenges mentioned earlier. Between 2001 and 2010, the government of South Africa worked with the Malian government to assist with the interventions to preserve and protect the ancient manuscripts found in the Timbuktu region. It is estimated that there are over 100 000 manuscripts found in the region with the National Geographic raising the estimation to 700 000¹⁹. The majority of these are found at Institut des Hautes Etudes et de Recherches Islamiques – Ahmed Baba (IHERI-AB) or Ahmed Baba Institute with more than 30 000 and the rest are with family, religious, and private libraries scattered all over the Timbuktu region. It is estimated that the oldest of these manuscripts dates back to the 13th century.

The ancient manuscripts of Timbuktu provide a good example where the threats to their survival ranges from natural, social, political to environmental challenges. The interconnectedness between the manuscripts and the broader cultural heritage of the region demands a multipronged approach when looking at solutions to protect and preserve them. The manuscripts complement the broader cultural

¹⁹ These estimations are mostly based on assumptions that more manuscripts are still being discovered. However, it is safer to use the estimations based on the manuscripts that are known to exist and their locations can be verified. It is estimated that there are 60 private libraries in Timbuktu alone. However, there are more ancient manuscripts in Djene and other regions of Mali which were not included in the South Africa Mali Timbuktu Manuscripts Project.

heritage landscape of Timbuktu and any interventions should take this into account. This means that any threats facing other cultural heritage such as memorials, mausoleums and mosques also affect the safety of the manuscripts. In the midst is also the religious issues that seem to invoke extremism such as happened in 2012 when a systematic destruction of the symbols that are regarded as blasphemy in Islam was carried out.

While many of these manuscripts are original in their own right, some are copies of copies which often tend to create confusion as to their correct age. Some of the manuscripts are written on modern paper using modern inks but there are those that are clearly written on older paper using older inks such as iron gall inks and some have elaborate gilding and decorations used in medieval manuscripts in Europe. There is no clear history of papermaking in Timbuktu which suggests that the paper used was imported or the manuscripts may have been imported too. Examination of some of the watermarks on some of the paper revealed that Italian and Spanish paper was used. Some of the manuscripts are written in Ajami, an Arabic script used specifically to write local languages such as Songhay, Wolof, Hausa, Fulfulde and Tamasheq.²⁰

A few of the manuscripts examined showed the use of home-made inks such as indigo and iron gal that are still in use by the craftsmen in Timbuktu to dye leather and cloth. The subjects covered by the manuscripts include theology, Sufism, law, commerce, legal documents, medicine, folk law, poetry and grammar, amongst others. Ownership of the manuscripts had a class issue where only the wealthy families could afford to buy them which is the reason that there are known scholarly families such as that of Ahmed Baba after whom the Ahmed Baba Institute is named. Apparently Ahmed Baba himself produced 70 works in Arabic.

²⁰ Lost Libraries of Timbuktu - <http://www.understandingslavery.com/images/stories/documents/caseStudies/theLostLibrariesofTimbuktu.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2016)

Timbuktu was established as a trade centre on the banks of the Niger River in AD 1100 and was part of the Ghana Empire (Wise & Taleb, 2011) (Boissoneault, 2015) Traders came from the Sahara Desert with salt that they traded with traders from the South who came with gold. There are different explanations as to how the name Timbuktu came about (Explore Timbuktu). Some believe it was named after a woman by the name Buktu who lived next to the oasis or well which is known as Tim in the local language hence the name tim-buktu. The region has gone through centuries of invasions from the Moroccans under Ahmad I al-Mansur and the French, and several eruptions of resistance by the Tuaregs as recent as 2012. The Moroccans were so jealousy of the intellectualism of Timbuktu to the extent that they kidnapped Ahmed Baba and took him to Morocco and they also confiscated his and other archives.

The work that South Africa did sought to provide proper infrastructure for the preservation of the manuscripts, develop conservation skills and collaborate on awareness projects aimed at encouraging access and usage of the manuscripts to benefit knowledge development. The project was successful in achieving its intended objectives and in 2009 the new building for the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu was inaugurated. While good work has been done by many donors including South Africa, the Malians themselves have done tremendous work over the centuries. Internationally accepted standards may find the methods used in past to be unorthodox, but one should appreciate that to preserve and protect such large numbers of manuscripts from harsh climate and wars would have required a lot of expertise and skills. This is a unique competency that the owners of the manuscripts have and it was tested in 2012 where they safely and secretly evacuated the manuscripts from Timbuktu. The world can learn a lot from the Malians in protecting cultural heritage during hostile situations.

Full scale international involvement only started in the 1970s with the efforts by UNESCO and other interested organisations who assisted with the establishment of the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmed Baba (CEDRAB), later known as Institut des Hautes Etudes et de Recherches Islamiques – Ahmed Baba (IHERI-

AB) or in short Ahmed Baba Institute. Awareness programmes created another threat that was not initially a problem. It invited more visitors to Timbuktu, as a consequence of that; many manuscripts were now exposed to unscrupulous collectors, abuse by owners who realised that the manuscripts could be used to raise donor funds. In many cases the money was never used for the purpose to which it was donated. Even representatives of donor agents would also make sure some of the money meant for the preservation of the manuscripts end up in their pockets. On the other hand Timbuktu experienced its second golden era between 2003 and 2011 when roads, infrastructure, hospitals, schools, houses and many other community development programmes.

There is an appreciation of the manuscripts by the Timbuktu population who sees them as their main source of income through tourism. Timbuktu has seen high moments and low moments over the centuries with the most development being enjoyed from 2003 – 2012 as a result of donor agencies, governments, and the Malian government bringing in the much needed infrastructural development. Unfortunately, this development was halted by the invasion in 2012 which led to major emigration. Due to the vigilance of the local communities, by the time the rebels descended on Timbuktu in 2012 the manuscripts had been secretly evacuated to the capital city of Bamako.

During the research work in Timbuktu, the researcher also found out certain cultural aspects that have contributed for centuries to the preservation of these manuscripts. Each family had a person who was identified to be the heir and custodian of the heritage. This person would swear publicly to protect and make sure the heritage was passed on to the next generation. There is also a belief that the manuscripts have protective powers which is why there are so many conditions that need to be met when handling them. These powers could be of a religious or cultural nature. For this reason, even up to now some of the manuscripts are kept secret and have never been revealed to outsiders.

The manuscripts are still in Bamako the capital city of Mali. Many experts have mentioned the new risks to the manuscripts as that of high humidity experienced in Bamako. The manuscripts have spent centuries in a dry climate and now have to adapt to high levels of humidity, pollution and vibration due to heavy traffic. While it is necessary to evacuate the manuscripts to protect them, Timbuktu is left with almost nothing to sustain its economy. The manuscripts were the main attraction and without them tourists are no longer going to Timbuktu. The prolonged absence of the manuscripts from Timbuktu can be seen as indications of the lack of security and so people will be afraid to visit Timbuktu. Unfortunately, decision makers have to make decisions here. It is difficult to project when another invasion will take place in Timbuktu. The coup d'états that took place in 2012 happened in Bamako which is supposed to be safer but the situation was very bad and the manuscripts are still vulnerable especially because the population in Bamako do not have a cultural attachment to the manuscripts as with the people of Timbuktu. For years there have also been calls by some to move the manuscripts from Timbuktu to Bamako for better preservation but this would definitely destroy Timbuktu.

Beyond the repair of infrastructure and return of the manuscripts, there needs to be serious discussion on the streamlining of the resources for the preservation of the manuscripts heritage. More can be achieved when organisations and countries work together on a collective objective. At some point during the South African Mali Timbuktu Manuscripts Project, there was a lot of competition by various organisations claiming to be leading on the work. This created an environment conducive for corruption. Fortunately, South Africa had signed an agreement with the government of Mali and the project was housed under that specific agreement at a bilateral level. In its project, South Africa employed the SMART principle in which objectives were specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic and time bound. No direct funds were paid to the Malians to implement the projects. Governance structures were put in place and a trust fund was launched to remove the possible procurement delays if the funds were to be managed through government departments.

Conservation work focussed on two aspects. The first was the training of the Malian Conservators. Five trainees were brought to South Africa for eight weeks per year for three years. The majority of the training was done at the National Archives in Pretoria with a week spent in Cape Town at the National Library. The South African Conservation Team comprised of Alexio Motsi (author), Mary Minicka (SA Parliament and later Western Cape Provincial Archives) and the late Mr Oswald Cupido (National Library of South Africa). The Conservation team conducted two-week fieldwork trips to Timbuktu once a year from 2003 to 2005. This was to assist the Malian trainees to implement the training they had received in South Africa. Also in Timbuktu 9 extra trainees were trained bringing the total number of trainees to fourteen. The second aspect of Conservation was the actual conservation work which was done during the fieldwork trips and also the provision of conservation material and equipment.

8. Challenges and points to note

Working on the ancient manuscripts of Mali helped the researcher to understand the nature of African archiving. The current systems are based on documented, tried and tested western methods that are seen to be superior to any of the undocumented ones. The key word is “documented”. The families and custodians of the manuscripts did not write anything to explain how they have been able to preserve their collections over centuries. When we examined the paper we found out that the majority of the paper is the same as that which was used in Europe at the same time. Where good quality paper was used the condition of the manuscripts were as good as their counterparts in Europe for the same period. We also realised that since the involvement of the world from the 1970s, the condition of the manuscripts became more vulnerable because of increased handling and exposure. Commodification²¹ of the manuscripts also brought in unscrupulous collectors and enticed poor owners to sell their collections.

²¹ When the existence of the manuscripts became public, many unscrupulous collectors landed in Timbuktu to buy the manuscripts.

Archives are constantly faced with preservation challenges. At the top of this is the resource constraints. The little resources available still have to be reprioritised to focus on areas where the most impact can be attained. The priorities are usually informed by national priorities that also focus on responding to the basic needs of the general population. Unfortunately for archives, they always find themselves very low on the priority list because they are seen as products of events that have already been accomplished. Archives are the past and it is very difficult to argue and justify prioritising them over health, education and other humanitarian priorities. It is even difficult to compare an archival record to a published book. Libraries are more resourced because they are accessible to anyone who can read and write and this access carries no restrictions as compared to archives where access is minimised in favour of long-term preservation.

There was a time when archivists looked at access as the justification for preservation of archives. The motto “preservation for access’ has been used but it does not seem to have made major steps because by their unique nature archives still require protection and restricted access. In comparison, libraries get way more visitors in one day than an archival repository receives in a week. This is the dilemma facing archives. To then justify the cost required to preserve the archives is a mammoth task, which is why collaboration between public, private and organisational archives makes a lot of sense. When there is collaboration, the costs tend to be shared. The current situation in South Africa is that there is still a lot of competition among the different archives.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

The adoption of modern technology will go a long way in improving the preservation of our archival heritage. Strategies such as digitisation can make it possible for us to provide access to information on obsolete carriers and formats. In the audio-visual environment, there is a lot of deterioration going on while we struggle to find the resources to preserve them. Film, video and sound

archives are lost due to obsolescence and natural deterioration. Electronic records are being lost because there are no resources to speed up the move to collect electronic records.

There was a time when there were those who were advocating for paperless offices and there were aggressive moves to move towards that. However, the reality is that paper has continued to dominate as the most acceptable official format. It can also be noted that there is a lot of information in the electronic environment that is not managed properly and is getting lost.

The project to preserve the Timbuktu manuscripts provided an opportunity for the re-evaluation of the general preservation methods as accepted internationally. The unique circumstances, environment and cultural influences in Timbuktu demanded a re-look at conservation practices normally applied for preserving similar resources. While the extreme weather conditions rendered most of the techniques inadequate, the religious and cultural influences highlighted the need to incorporate communities who are accustomed to the customs under which the manuscripts were initially created.

Cultural heritage materials do not just exist in isolation; they are created for specific purposes. Most cultural heritage found in museums, galleries, archives and libraries have been used before they are collected and by these cultural institutions. Therefore, preserving these heritage material should not only look at the physical preservation but must take into account the purpose for which it was created.

Archives are records that have already served their primary purpose. As they get transferred to a repository, their value changes to that of evidential, or research. Most of these records would have been in existence for at least twenty years²² and their physical condition

²² This is the current requirement in South Africa according to the National Archives and Records Service Act No. 43 of 1996 (as amended).

would have been compromised as they may have endured heavy usage and poor storage (especially during their semi-current life).

With the current budget cuts (in South Africa and other countries), archives find themselves at the bottom of the priority list in terms of funding. Repositories are being forced by budgetary constraints to stop some critical archival functions and this basically amounts to intentional benign neglect. Many records are suffering benign neglect while in the custody of those who are tasked to look after them. Endangerment of archives also have the direct link to the endangerment of the archival profession

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