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# The incunabula of African intellectualism and civilization: some reflections on the preservation of the Timbuktu manuscripts

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## Abstract

A conference on Archives of Post-independence Africa and its Diaspora was held from June 20-23, 2012 in Dakar, Senegal. This conference was organized by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the African Studies Centre, Leiden (ASC) and the University of California African Studies Multi-campus Research Group (MRG). This English-French bilingual conference was attended by a wide range of academics, archivists, librarians, public intellectuals and artists from the African continent, Europe, North America and beyond. One of the conference's thematic area centred on issue of administering the archive especially in view of the challenges faced by the archives on the African continent in relation to the digital revolution and political instability. The conference expressed concern at the growing political instability in Mali which threatens the Timbuktu manuscripts. Historians, academics and archivists bemoaned Mali's failed state and chronicled their experiences as they catalogued the on-going destruction of this valuable heritage. Because of the instability, this "tin-trunk literacy" was being transferred from official depositories and finding its way into the basements of individual households where it had previously been housed for centuries. The cycle of archiving and re-archiving at private or personal level as evidenced in Mali points to the need to depoliticise the archive. The fact that the Timbuktu manuscripts have survived for centuries in those household basements, in storerooms and garages for example, is a strong African archival tradition that deserves special commendation considering that modern archives are mainly Western in conception. On the other hand, the efforts made by the South African Government to preserve this Timbuktu heritage are applaudable but the deplorable state of its archives at both state and provincial levels raises eyebrows as it appears this was political expediency with the so-called African Renaissance concept.

**Keywords:** Timbuktu manuscripts, digitization, archiving, preservation, African Renaissance

## 1 Introduction

A conference on Archives of Post-independence Africa and its Diaspora was held from June 20-23, 2012 in Dakar, Senegal. This conference was organized by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the African Studies Centre, Leiden (ASC) and the University of California African Studies Multi-campus Research Group (MRG). This English-French bilingual conference was attended by a wide range of academics, archivists, librarians, public intellectuals and artists from the African continent, Europe, North America and beyond. The papers were organised around five thematic areas:

1. Archival absences and surrogate collections of the African state.
2. Performing the archive.
3. Post-independence media formations.

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4. Spatialization of art and the archive.
  5. Administering the archive.

The fifth thematic area will be my point of reference as it centred on the challenges faced by the archives on the African continent in relation to the digital revolution. The situation on the ground is that digitization is either function oriented in terms of promoting access or preservation oriented with regard to targeting those archives either exposed to agents of deterioration or frequently used. Haidara (2008:206) noted for instance that the Timbuktu 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 hence efforts to arrest the situation through digitization and proper storage. It is against the background of trying to preserve the precious treasures of Mali that the Timbuktu manuscripts come into perspective. Timbuktu is home of thousands of manuscripts documenting the rich heritage of West Africa through the ages and thus the ongoing violence threatens the development of African historiography as a whole.

Aluka (2000-2010; Ryan 2009) noted that during the past two centuries, most of the manuscripts have been concealed, often buried or hidden to safeguard them from colonial agents, lawlessness, and political instability. Partly as a result of the conditions in which the manuscripts were stored, they face an array of conservation challenges, including damage from insects, desiccation, and the fading of certain inks. To help house and preserve these priceless ancient documents, the South Africa Mali project was officially launched in 2003 and the construction of a new state-of-the-art facility which is under threat due to the ongoing conflict commenced in November 2005.

The conference expressed concern at the growing political instability in Mali which threatens this cultural patrimony. Historians, academics and archivists bemoaned Mali's failed state and chronicled their experiences as they catalogued the ongoing destruction of this valuable heritage. Because of the instability, this "tin-trunk literacy" was being transferred from official depositories and finding its way into the basements of individual households where it had previously been housed for centuries. Fletcher (2012) observed that Malian scholars, librarians and ordinary citizens in the rebel-occupied city of Timbuktu are hiding away priceless ancient manuscripts to prevent them from being damaged or looted.

## 2 The Timbuktu manuscript collections

According to Aluka (2000-2010), the Timbuktu Manuscripts Collection offers an unparalleled window into societies and intellectual traditions of the Western Sudan from the late 15th century onward. The manuscripts are now under grave threat from a variety of sources, both natural and human. Starting in 2005, Aluka began to collaborate with partner organisations in Mali, South Africa, and the United States to digitize a selection of the manuscripts and make them available to an international scholarly audience and, at the same time, support critically important conservation and cataloguing efforts. With the release of this collection, the first of these manuscripts are now available in the digital library which is now under threat due to the harsh realities of conflict between the Tuareg rebels and the Islamists as evidenced by the bombings.

Following the collapse of the empire of Mali in 1433, Timbuktu was incorporated into the Songhai Empire in 1468, and reached its apogee of prosperity and scholarship in the 16th century during the Songhai Askia Dynasty. Even before the rise of the Songhai Empire, Timbuktu was part of the vast trade routes linking the Western Sudan to the Maghreb, stretching onward to the Fertile Crescent and other regions of the Near East. When Leo Af-

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ricanus visited Timbuktu in the early 1500s, he reported that its people were very wealthy and that books and manuscripts imported from North Africa were the most profitable commodity. In the latter part of the 16th century, the town was reported to have thousands of students studying theology, law, astronomy, and other subjects (Aluka 2000-2010).

The manuscripts and their covers demonstrate a sophisticated visual and technical artistry and reflect a rich intellectual and scholarly tradition. They cover a diverse range of topics and genres, including the natural and physical sciences (astronomy, mathematics, botany, and medicine); the literary arts (poetic verse, panegyrics, grammar); the Islamic religious sciences such as theology (*kalām*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), legal opinions (*fatāwa*); and historical accounts (*tarikḥ*). Many of the manuscripts are written in local vernaculars (some of which are archaic forms of the present-day languages of Songhay, Tamasheq, and Fulfulde, among others) with Arabic script. Charts, diagrams, commentaries, and marginalia are plentiful; some recount complex genealogies and scientific theories, others record intellectual disagreements among scholars, teachers, and commentators (Aluka 2000-2010). Patel (2012) noted that they are a veritable treasure trove of human knowledge and an expert on Mali, Syson (2012; See also Jeppie 2008:15) further posited that:

What is so important about Timbuktu's literary patrimony is that it is a challenge to Western ideas that Africa is a land of song and dance and oral tradition. It reveals a continent with an immensely rich literary and scientific heritage.

Diallo (2012; See also Jeppie 2008:15) echoed similar sentiments and reiterated that:

Making a *tabula rasa* of Africa's intellectual history was one of the main components of the colonial enterprise. The erroneous assertion that Africans were intellectually inexistent before the advent of colonialism, just as a way of legitimizing the subjugation and enslavement of Africans should be discouraged.

It is this intellectual heritage that inspired the birth of the African Renaissance concept spearheaded by South Africa's Thabo Mbeki in 2001 that we now turn to in the next paragraphs.

### **3 The Mali-South Africa Timbuktu Manuscripts Project**

The project collaborates with the Government of Mali and with other stakeholders and role-players in preserving, cataloguing and appropriately and securely housing the Malian documentary heritage at the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu. Specifically it is assisting with the conservation of the historic manuscripts of Timbuktu through the provision of training, technical support and assistance for the development of conservation facilities. In 2003, the South African Government, through the National Archives of South Africa and the Department of Arts and Culture, instituted a training programme for Malian conservators and heritage professionals at appropriate South African institutions. This programme completed the second phase of a three-year internship programme to train conservators from the Ahmed Baba Institute in preservation and conservation repair. The final stages of the programme involved conservation and repair to the manuscripts (The South Africa Mali Project 2004).

The South African National Archives and the South African National Library have also embarked on a programme to provide materials and to train conservation staff at the Ahmed Baba Institute on ways to improve preventive measures to avoid further deterioration of fragile manuscripts. This involves determining and executing the best techniques for the removal of foreign and potentially harmful materials from the manuscripts, the development of correct handling procedures, and the construction of appropriate storage boxes.

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Further preventive measures include the development of a disaster plan which takes into account the need for good “house-keeping” in view of the potential destructiveness of the fine Saharan sand, pest control and the extreme temperatures experienced in the desert (The South Africa Mali Project 2004).

The project has also encouraged academics at South African universities to visit Timbuktu with a view to promoting the formal study of the manuscripts. To this end Dr. Shamil Jeppie of the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town has undertaken a two-year project with a team of researchers studying a selection of materials. The materials selected for study deal with the development of law and scholarship in Timbuktu. Future research will include work on a selection of science materials (The South Africa Mali Project 2004) and they aim at building a digital archive to complement the manuscript collection.

Lastly, the project raises funds from South African business and the public for the construction of a purpose-built archive/library which will provide the protection required so as to properly house, preserve and protect the manuscripts. It has already executed a preliminary investigation and a needs-analysis, on the basis of which a concept design and costing exercise was completed. The Provincial government of the Western Cape has supported this aspect of the project by convening a group of professionals in the construction industry to take this process further. Accordingly a team of builders, engineers, quantity surveyors and architects from the Western Cape was sent to Timbuktu to investigate the requirements for the actual construction of the archive in Timbuktu. Their findings informed the specifications and procurement requirements for the final design and construction of the state of the art building begun in 2002 and officially opened in 2009 (The South Africa Mali Project 2004).

The Government of South Africa provided strategic direction and capacity for the implementation of the SA-Mali Project through an Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC). The IMC was supported by a technical implementation team drawn from government officials in the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) and the Presidency. A project manager was appointed on contract by DAC (The South Africa Mali Project 2004).

Through the work of the IMC, the Timbuktu Manuscripts Trust has been established with a view to ensure prudent governance for the implementation of the Project. The Trust further ensures coordination between South Africa and Mali and also assists with raising the necessary funds for the execution. These include costs of design and construction, infrastructure, fieldwork, provision of equipment and materials (The South Africa Mali Project 2004).

#### **4 Discussion**

It is commendable that many collections have been digitized and that local scholars have been trained in how to interpret the literary treasures, most of which are family collections that have been handed down from generation to generation. Some scholars have rightly pointed out that Africans should be able to control the rate and nature of digitization of their own intellectual heritage and they should have access to these resources unhindered by external interests.<sup>1</sup> Put bluntly, Africans should be able to set their own digitization agenda and

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<sup>1</sup> P. Limb, “The Digitization of Africa”, *Africa Today*, 52, 2, 2005, pp 3-20; J.J. Britz and P.J. Lor, “A Moral Reflection on the Information Flow From South to North: An African Perspective”, *Libri: International Journal of Libraries and Information Services*, 53,

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thus counter cultural pillaging. South Africa has thrown its weight behind efforts to preserve the priceless Timbuktu manuscripts and the investment in infrastructure and human resources towards this are vast.

The new facility built with South African help at an estimated cost of between R50-million and R60-million, boasts an archive capable of housing between 30 000 to 50 000 manuscripts in the Institute's collection, with temperature and humidity controls necessary to provide the correct conditions for preserving the manuscripts. The building also comprises a conservative laboratory, an auditorium, an outdoor amphitheatre, a public library and administrative offices<sup>2</sup> (Big Media Publishers 2009).

This South Africa-Mali Manuscript Project is the first official cultural project of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Africa needs more of these partnerships though some critics have argued that this is some form of disguised South African imperialism in the continent, a viewpoint which reignites the debate on the politics of information imperialism.<sup>3</sup> The North-South divide or unequal exchange in this instance has interesting ideological ramifications.

Be that as it may, the fact that the cycle of archiving and re-archiving at private or personal level as evidenced in Mali points to the need to depoliticise the archive. The fact that the Timbuktu manuscripts have survived for centuries in those household basements, in storerooms and garages for example, is a strong African archival tradition that deserves special commendation considering that modern archives are mainly Western in conception as observed by Mazrui (1985). Cloonan (2007) rightly pointed out that the preservation of cultural heritage has been around for millennia, as illustrated by the biblical passage "take these evidences--- and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue for many days" (Jeremiah 32:14).

This tradition of archiving spans centuries which cannot be eliminated by the stroke of the pen, hence the need to decolonise the mind that these state of the art official repositories are the panacea to preservation problems. The ghost of the colonial archive syndrome is still metastasising and Durrani (2008:210) posited that Africans need to free themselves from the colonial/imperialism shackle and liberate the mind. Durani (2008:125) stated that in all societies with class divisions and class struggle, information services tend to be a service for elite by elite, providing a service to the dominating classes and their allies only. Fletcher

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2003, pp 160-173; Pickover, "Negotiations, Contestations and Fabrications: The Politics of Archives in South Africa ten years after democracy".

<sup>2</sup> Reports that some of this infrastructure has already been destroyed due to the ongoing conflict could not be verified at the time of the compilation of this article.

<sup>3</sup> There is one school of thought which holds the polemic view that schemes to digitise Africa's heritage per se are a form of neo-imperial information grab in the form of digital capitalism. See P.J. Lor, "Digital Libraries and Archiving Knowledge: Some Critical Questions", *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science* 74, 2, 2008, p 119.

P. Limb, "Ethical Issues in Southern African Archives and Libraries", *Innovation: Journal of Appropriate Librarianship and Information Work in Southern Africa*, 24, 2002, pp 51-57.

P. Limb, "The Politics of Digital "Reform and Revolution": Towards Mainstreaming and African Control of African Digitization", *Innovation: Journal of Appropriate Librarianship and Information Work in Southern Africa*, 34, 2007, p 19.

J.J. Britz and P.J. Lor, "A Moral Reflection on the Information Flow From South to North: An African Perspective", *Libri: International Journal of Libraries and Information Services*, 53, 2003, pp 160-173;

F. Garaba and P. Ngulube. "Moving with the times in search of permanence: the digitization of "liberation struggle" archives in southern Africa". *Historia* 55 (2), 2010, pp.163 -181.

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(2012) observed that some texts were stashed for generations in private libraries, underground vaults, mud homes and in desert caves in and around the city of Timbuktu by proud Malian families who feared they would be stolen by Moroccan invaders, European explorers and then French colonialists. Examples are the Fondo Kati and Haidar collections to name a few.

Apparently, because of the recent conflict, Fletcher (2012) noted that power outages already occurring in the city would affect the special air conditioning required to better preserve the oldest crumbling manuscripts. Cloonan (2007) poignantly noted that while preservation tries to assure the survival of the human record, it is not just a technical or managerial activity, but a social, political and cultural activity as well. Thomas (2012) echoed similar sentiments and stated that the growing distance from the metropolis makes it all too clear that the “archive” needs to be repackaged and inscribed into specific regional and local social and topographical contexts.

In any case you can only delay the deterioration process when it comes to collections and in view of the fact that nothing is perfect, Weber (1999) noted that all archival material like all other organic materials, will lose their stability sooner or later until they ultimately deteriorate. In addition, digitization is not the panacea to preservation problems as it is not a proven preservation medium in view of media impermanence (Hunter 2000; Ngulube 2002). The situation in Mali is catastrophic and saddening and it really puts to test the unity of Africans, if ever military intervention is contemplated as an unpalatable alternative. The role of the international community through UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee will also need to be factored in, in view of the fact that international law as guaranteed by the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict 1999 amongst other issues penalizes the intentional destruction of cultural heritage. Nonetheless, it is my opinion that any military intervention has the potential to exacerbate the already precarious situation which will only expedite the disintegration of this cultural patrimony.

In the meantime, South Africa will need to draw lessons from this project and to work at putting its own house in order considering that its local archives are in a dire situation. Ngoepe (2011) observed that the country does not even have the infrastructure to harvest electronic records and if this anything to go by, could the Timbuktu expedition be viewed as a spectacular example of misplaced priorities? This appears to be the case as the present state of archives in South Africa is symptomatic of a haemorrhage that was caused by this African Renaissance adventure, as well as other factors. Commenting on the paralysis presently prevailing with regards to the state of archives in South Africa, Ngoepe (2011) further noted from one pundit that:

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARS) is hampered by red tape and lack of funds. It is so dreadfully under-resourced and politically hamstrung that it can barely perform the simplest of its mandated duties.

Renowned historian Shula Marks (2012) reiterated similar sentiments and is quoted at length:

It is therefore important that states have well-managed archives and it is disappointing that, at the moment, all the evidence suggests that conditions in South Africa’s national and provincial archives are deteriorating alarmingly. This has long been true of some provincial archives, where there have been few trained archivists and local governments have lacked systematic and safe methods of depositing their records in the archives. As disturbing is the current state of the national archives. A serious lack

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of storage space for new documents or a clear strategy for capturing and maintaining digital records, as well as a dearth of trained archivists, have begun to take their toll. It is noteworthy that in the budget debate in Parliament earlier this year the minister of arts and culture did not mention the national archives. His department's 2012 strategic and performance plan gave just one bland sentence to these crucial issues. One can only conclude that the minister and his department, like many members of the public, have little idea of the importance of a national archive.

The foregoing remarks paint a sombre picture on the state of archives within South Africa and are emblematic of how politicised archives can become and this situation can be generalized to the majority of developing countries. The bottom line is that while ironically the national archive reflects the views of the powerful, the same archival institutions are consistently neglected by government. In view of this fact, the archival profession will need more activists in the mould of Harris (2007), Ngoepe (2009 & 2011), Ngulube (2002 & 2009), Marks (2012) Mnjama (2005), Mazikana (1999) and Durrani (2008) in order for the voice of archivists to be heard and hopefully for solutions to be prescribed to address the alarming status quo.

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