



Safeguarding the Manuscripts from Timbuktu



Since 2004 Azzagra Cultural Association has been working to preserve and protect the important manuscript legacy of the city of Timbuktu, more than 280,000 Islamic manuscripts.

The safety of these manuscripts was threatened when political and civil unrest erupted in the North of Mali in March 2012. The Azzagra Cultural Association played an active role in the rescue mission for the manuscript collections. This rescue mission ensured that 95% of the manuscripts in these collections were successfully rescued from the threat of extinction by the political conflict and civil unrest. The manuscripts were transferred from Timbuktu to Bamako, the capital of the Republic of Mali, with a difficult and challenging transportation program.

However, the condition of the storage in Bamako poses yet another threat to the manuscripts. Currently, institutions and funding from many different countries are contributing to the preservation of these collections in Bamako, but so far the efforts are not sufficient. This report will give an overview of the past and present, and the urgent strategies needed to protect this important and irreplaceable heritage.

THE MANUSCRIPT LEGACY OF TIMBUKTU

Timbuktu is a city rich in history and cultural heritage. In the 14th century, it became actively involved in the trans-Saharan trade between tropical African and Mediterranean Africa and by the 16th century Timbuktu grew into an important intellectual centre. It attracted many Muslim scholars from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa who brought manuscripts from various Islamic lands and who copied and composed an impressive number of manuscripts on a wide variety of subjects, dating from the 14th to the early 20th century.



The Timbuktu Manuscripts represent the scholarly and scribal activity in the city and beyond, including the whole region of Mali and its neighbouring countries, such as Senegal and Mauritania. The manuscripts have been preserved in private household libraries for centuries and their tremendous value for the history of the 14th to 20th century Africa is yet to be explored. During the last 25 years institutions and projects by various local and international stakeholders have been raising awareness for the manuscripts and gradually making them accessible for research.

SAVAMA (Association de Sauvegarde et Valorisation des Manuscrits et la Defense de la Culture Islamique) was launched as an association of private family libraries who owned the majority of the manuscripts of Timbuktu. These institutions have transitioned from an association to a single NGO which has over 377,000 manuscripts in its care, entrusted to them by 45 families of Timbuktu. The SAVAMA-DCI has received financial support from several foreign governments and organisations, among them the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, the Juma al-Majid Centre of Dubai, the Prince Claus Fund, the DOEN Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

In 2005 the Azzagra Cultural Association signed a protocol of collaboration to preserve the Kati Fond Library, which includes an important collection of manuscripts related to al-Andalus Islamic Legacy.

“The ultimate goal of our efforts is to preserve and protect a world class and irreplaceable collection of manuscripts, through it's reunification and housing in the adequate location in Bamako. Working for It's preservation, conservation and digitisation to promote it's security and access”

-Abdessamad Romero.



Despite these efforts by many institutions, the needs were still much greater than the means. The situation worsened even further in 2012 with the aforementioned political and civil problems.



Official news photos about the burning of the manuscript collections in Timbuktu, after most manuscripts were already moved. The pictures reflect in reality some of the preservation boxes without evidence of burning manuscripts.

THE EVACUATION

After the events of the crisis in Northern Mali in 2012 SAVAMA was supported by a number of its partners in the emergency evacuation of the manuscripts to Bamako. In cooperation with some of the institutions named above, especially the Juma al-Majid Center and Azzagra Cultural Association, approximately 285,000 manuscripts were rescued and moved to Bamako. The distance between Bamako, located in the south of the country, and Timbuktu is approximately 700 Kilometres.

From June 2012 to January 2013 around 285,000 amassed manuscripts travelled that distance. They were carried in metal chests the size of large suitcases on vehicles on the road and canoes on the river. In order to avoid raising suspicion with the insurgents they were transported in stages, with a total of approximately 1,200 single-car transits. According to Dr. Haidara's estimation, 95% of the Timbuktu Manuscripts were saved.



Dr. Abd al Kadir Haidara with Prof. Abdessamad with some of the chests at Bamako



CONDITION OF MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS IN BAMAKO

From April 23rd to 27th the project team of the CSMC conducted its first assessment visit to the Timbuktu collections stored in Bamako and the surrounding area. Dr. Dmitry Bondarev (Scholar of West African Manuscripts) and Eva Brozowsky (Freelance Conservator) reported:

“... At present, the objects displayed as well as the remaining approximately 285,000 rescued manuscripts are being stored in several temporary locations in and around Bamako. Most of them are still tightly packed in 2,400 metal chests, which served as a protection during the rescue operation. However, since their arrival in Bamako this way of storing is posing a threat to the fragile documents. They are packed and locked too tightly; some are severely deformed due to the transport. Other chests exert extreme pressure on the chests and manuscripts underneath them. In addition, the climate in the chests is very humid, causing mould. The climate conditions in Bamako differ greatly from those in Timbuktu. The weather in the desert city is very dry, the capital is quite humid.”¹



Manuscript conditions in this report were classified into three different categories: 60% show a stable condition, 20% present more severe damage, 20% are extremely fragile and severely damaged. The report affirms that in order to prevent further damage, immediate emergency measures have to be implemented.



SAVAMA developed a 5-year rescue program that focuses mainly on the following strategies:²

- Cataloguing and translating the manuscripts
- Restoring and preserving the manuscripts (in quality archival boxes)
- Digitisation
- Training
- Exploitation and promotion
- Renovating libraries and bringing back the manuscripts to Timbuktu

¹ Safeguarding the manuscripts from Timbuktu. Conservation, Restoration and Research. Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC). Hamburg October 2013.

² Introduction to SAVAMA: Preserving the ancient manuscript of Timbuktu. Planning October 2014 donor conference.

In recent months Mr. Abd al-Qader Haidara visited different institutions and attended conferences in order to fundraise for this project. He reported that the ultimate goal of the project is that all manuscripts return to their respective libraries in Timbuktu, where they will have the appropriate housing conditions and needed security. In order to achieve this goal the manuscripts will be preserved in Bamako (in the best possible conditions), and in parallel libraries will be rebuilt and repaired in Timbuktu to house their manuscripts again.

SAVAMA obtained help from different institutions and started to set up different actions. However the help that they are receiving is not enough to solve the problems and risks of the manuscripts still in 45 different locations of Bamako. Several trips were done by Azzagra Foundation during the last years to report on this urgent situation in order to try and solve it.



AZZAGRA CULTURAL ASSOCIATION ACTION



Our Association is an independent cultural and academic institution that holds various academic and research projects related to manuscripts, especially those that are connected to Al-Andalus. We believe in the importance of preserving heritage as in Spain we have suffered the results of the loss of a much of our written Andalusian legacy.

Since 2005 the Azzagra Cultural Association has been actively working on the protection, preservation and dissemination of the Manuscripts of Timbuktu. Since the events of 2012, Prof. AbdeSsamad Romero, President of Azzagra Cultural Association was involved on the urgent safeguarding of the manuscripts. We can resume the actions as follow:

1. Several trips with manuscripts experts, to prepare reports on the situation.
2. Political agreements between national and international institutions for the safeguarding of the manuscripts and their protection in Bamako.
3. Coordinating work with other institutions that work on the ground.
4. Organisation of conferences and different events around the world to create awareness on the situation.
5. Finding other private libraries in the area that are in a similar situation but don't belong to the SAVAMA group.
6. Fundraising to support the work of SAVAMA and to protect other libraries such as the Fond Kati Manuscript Collection.
7. Publication of articles and coordination and co-production of documentaries.



Prof. AbdeSsamad Romero with the Minister of Culture in Bamako



Spanish private channel making a documentary on May 2016

PROPOSED URGENT ACTIONS BY AZZAGRA FOUNDATION

1. Bamako boxing machine program proposal

In his visit of March 2014 to the manuscript collections in Mali³ Prof. Romero had the opportunity of meeting Mrs. Eva Brozowsky and also had the opportunity of learning about her manuscript boxing program. She trained a team of people from the SAVAMA project in the manual construction of boxes, and she set up a workflow in which each manuscript that the project imaged is housed in its preservation box and afterwards is catalogued by the curators of the project. Each manuscript is located after the whole process in the new provisional storage of the SAVAMA project in Bamako. The workflow is slow because the team is small and are working with insufficient materials. Also the manual production is slow and the budget is not enough for the needs of the more than 280,000 manuscripts in the city.



The importance of the creation of a proper boxing program, including a boxing machine to accelerate the process of the boxing of the collection, is crucial for the following reasons:

- i. Manuscripts are in different venues and still inside the containers that were used for their urgent move from Timbuktu. They are still in inadequate storage conditions.
- ii. Based on the CSMC report⁴ the collection consists mostly of loose leaf manuscripts, many are housed in acidic cardboard folders and some in leather or parchment folders. Manuscripts will be more protected in suitable conservation boxes.



³ Manuscript collections condition in Mali. Report on the situation of the Timbuktu manuscript collections transferred to Bamako after the Military coup 2012. Antonio Romero, The Islamic Manuscript Association. February 2014.

⁴ Safeguarding the manuscripts from Timbuktu. Conservation, Restoration and Research. Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC). Hamburg October 2013.

- iii. Boxes will improve the condition of the items, they will prevent the swelling and distortion of manuscripts.
- iv. Boxes will prevent the further formation of mould produced as a result of the abrupt rise of the ambient humidity (the climate of Bamako is different to Timbuktu).
- v. Boxes will preserve the traditional leather folders.
- vi. Boxes will protect the manuscripts from dust and also from insects.

Most importantly, this program will protect the manuscripts in their future move to Timbuktu and will support the proper rehousing of all items in their home libraries.

The budget of the boxing program is available upon request.

- 2. Find funding to support the digitisation with a complete program (currently only selected material is being imaged).
- 3. Catalogue the collection.
- 4. Create a platform (on-line) dedicated to the dissemination of the imaged material.
- 5. Train a local team on preservation of the manuscript collections and on basic conservation.
- 6. Travel with Islamic manuscript curators to prepare a report on the content of the manuscript collection. Several institutions has published articles diminishing the importance of the content of the collection, to reduce it is value and reduce the awareness of the World, with the pretext that their manuscripts are copies of non important religious treatises, letters and other non important books.
- 7. Report on the situation of the other libraries.



جمعية الشجرة الثقافية الإسلامية
FUNDACIÓN CULTURAL AZZAGRA

Prof. Abdussamad Romero Roman
President of Azzagra Cultural Association
Ex-President & actual Member of the Islamic Manuscript Association