

## Cultural heritage at risk: the manuscripts of Timbuktu

Maria Luisa Russo

Co-manager of the international project "Safeguarding the manuscripts of Timbuktu"



In April 2012 the action of radical Islamist groups in the north of Mali put at risk the cultural heritage of Timbuktu, including manuscript collections that are part of this UNESCO world heritage site. The urgency of bringing them to safety led the owners to entrust them to Abdel Kader Haidara, Executive President of the NGO SAVAMA-DCI (SAuvegarde et VALorisation des MANuscrits pour la Défence de la Culture Islamique), who organised the transfer of around 300,000 manuscripts from Timbuktu to the capital Bamako, 700 km away, in a rescue operation that took several months.



*The metal chests used for moving the manuscripts from Timbuktu to Bamako*

During and after the rescue operation, international efforts joined together in order to protect the manuscripts, which had been moved in metal chests, and provide basic preservation measures.

Since 2013 the University of Hamburg, Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, has been part of these international efforts and has coordinated the project dedicated to the safeguard of the Timbuktu collections, financed by the German Federal Foreign Office, the Gerda Henkel Foundation and the Jutta Vogel Foundation.

The project allows for urgent preservation measures: manuscripts are inventoried, in both Arabic and French, dry cleaned and put into protective enclosures (folders and boxes); the German contribution also allows for the rehabilitation of library buildings in Timbuktu. All activities are carried out by local staff who have taken part in several training sessions over the years, organized by the University of Hamburg.

The project faces several challenges. Manuscripts have been moved to a climatic area where the rainy season can bring humidity to problematic levels; boxed items are stored in several storage locations, equipped with shelves, dataloggers for climate monitoring and basic climate control equipment (fans, dehumidifiers). Important issues remain, related to both the security situation, which is still not settled all over the country, and to practical aspects such as the purchase of specific materials and equipment for preservation that are not locally available and must be bought in Europe, with resultant higher costs and longer delivery time.



*Work on inventory lists, dry cleaning of manuscripts and dataloggers check in the storage rooms*

Efforts devoted to basic preservation measures towards the Timbuktu manuscripts have not, however, excluded support for other activities and for libraries located in different parts of the country. Financing by the Gerda Henkel Foundation has enabled the implementation of preservation and cataloguing activities in Djenné and Ségou, and the launch of a specific research project on African languages written in Arabic script (Ajami). This latter project, running since September 2015, is being carried out by local researchers with the coordination of Dr Dmitry Bondarev of the University of Hamburg, and allows for the study of manuscripts preserved not only in SAVAMA but also in private collections spread over the country.

The approach to collections safeguard has therefore two aspects: on the one hand, priority is given to preservation measures for the Timbuktu manuscripts moved to Bamako, through the creation of hand-lists and the implementation of basic preservation workflow such as dry cleaning, boxing, equipment of storage rooms; this effort in safeguarding the cultural heritage has also included support for other important Malian collections. On the other hand, research has been encouraged and implemented, thus stressing the role that cultural heritage plays in our society – not a static item to be merely preserved but a dynamic source for research and, in a wider sense, cultural and civil growth.

 *Maria Luisa Russo joined the Blue Shield Expert Network in 2017*  
[maria.luisa.russo@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:maria.luisa.russo@uni-hamburg.de)