

Timbuktu's First Private Manuscript Library

Timbuktu was declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1990. The city and its desert environs are a veritable treasure chest of Arabic manuscripts, produced at the pinnacle of intellectual development between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, and is thus justifiably described as a refuge for righteous and scholarly folk.

Veneration of the written word had found a secure place in the hearts of Timbuktu's inhabitants from very early on. Scholars and lay people alike held fast to whatever manuscripts they came to possess. Today, it is estimated that there are about 300 000 extant manuscripts in circulation in Timbuktu and the surrounding areas. Locked within these pages is one of Africa's greatest intellectual legacies. Fortunately, the keepers of this treasure are extremely committed to their culture of learning and sharing. Through the efforts of these Desert Librarians, this legacy is once again being rediscovered.

The government of Mali had instituted the Ahmed Baba Centre for Documentation and Historical Research, or CEDRAB, as it is generally referred to by its abbreviated French title, in Timbuktu in 1973. The Centre holds about 20 000 manuscripts, collected through the efforts of some outstanding individuals, including Dr Mahmud Zubayr, the Centre's first director, and Abdul Kader Haidara, who started out working for CEDRAB before going on to establish his own private library.

A desert librarian

Abdul Kader joined CEDRAB in 1984 and Zubayr instructed him in the finer points of manuscript classification, cataloguing, and collation. He was later encouraged by Zubayr to travel to the surrounding areas in search of manuscripts. From 1984 to 1987 Abdul Kader spent time in the outer regions. His first destination was a village called Ghurma Rarus, which is about 175km from Timbuktu, deep in the desert. He collected over a thousand manuscripts from there and in most cases paid double the asking price, returning to the area several times thereafter. On every occasion he managed to procure more manuscripts. In 1987 he travelled to Majakoue village and was able to collect about 2000 manuscripts there.

Abdul Kader continued working with CEDRAB until 2002, collecting about 16 000 manuscripts for the centre in the process. He went all over Mali, to villages, towns, desert settlements, even as far as the borders of Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Guinea, Niger, Algeria, and the Ivory Coast. In spite of these tremendous efforts, the centre's 20 000 manuscripts are still a conservative quantity, considering the estimated number of extant manuscripts in the region.

The Mamma Haidara commemorative library

Working for CEDRAB motivated Abdul Kader to start thinking about establishing a memorial library to hold his family's private collection. After leaving the centre he devoted all of his time and energy to this project and was successful in setting up the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library, which was the first of its kind in Mali.

The Haidara family is renowned for its scholars and judges. Abdul Kader's father, Mamma Haidara, was not only a *Qadi* (judge), but also a scholar who taught the classical Islamic sciences like Jurisprudence and

The importance of Timbuktu's manuscript legacy for the articulation of a post-colonial African historiography cannot be over-emphasized. This intellectual treasure is slowly being brought into the open through the efforts of local bibliophiles like Abdul Kader Haidara, the first person to establish a private manuscript library in Timbuktu. Haidara is keen to share the legacy with all who show interest in it, firm in the belief that the manuscripts belong to those who are dedicated to their study.

Arabic grammar. His personal library dates back to the sixteenth century and is one of the largest and oldest collections in the city.

The library was established by Mamma Haidara's forebear, Mohamed El Mawlud, and was handed down to his descendents, generation after generation. Mamma Haidara added to it substantially, buying manuscripts while studying in Egypt and Sudan. He also studied under local scholars in the village learning centres of Arawan and

Boujbeyha, procuring manuscripts there as well.

Abdul Kader began cataloguing his inherited collection and was assisted by the al-Furqan Heritage Foundation in London. Currently four of a projected five volume catalogue of the material has been published.

The importance of the effort of preserving the Timbuktu manuscripts and its potential impact upon the fields of African Studies and African History cannot be over emphasized. Colonial historiography has always held that Africa had few written languages and as such, the only reliable sources of knowledge on the pre-colonial period were archaeology and oral history. However, even these sources were rather tenuous, since archaeological findings may date back thousands of years and oral history may only be able to stretch back about a hundred years. Therefore, the efforts of desert librarians like Abdul Kader Haidara are fundamental to the development of post-colonial historiography in Africa.

Abdul Kader has recently embarked upon a collaborative project with researchers from the University of Cape Town who are studying his collection and have also begun assisting him to digitally preserve it. The Timbuktu-UCT research project is attempting to initiate research that will hopefully transform the prevailing wisdom suggesting that there is no written record of African history on the pre-colonial period.

ASLAM FAROUK-ALLI

Manuscripts from a private collection, Timbuktu



PHOTO BY ASLAM FAROUK-ALLI

Aslam Farouk-Alli is a researcher for the Timbuktu-UCT Manuscripts Project and lectures on Islamic studies and Arabic at the University of Cape Town (UCT).
E-mail: afarouk@humanities.uct.ac.za