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Has the Great Library of Timbuktu Been Lost?

Posted by *Lila Azam Zanganeh*



As the desert inches south into the city of Timbuktu, the sand settles on your skin and the air feels heavy in your lungs. When I travelled there nine years ago, the mythical city, home to the shrines of three hundred and thirty-three Sufi saints, left a bleak impression, tempered only by the selected wonders under glass at the Ahmed Baba Centre, an edifice which, until last Friday, housed between sixty and a hundred thousand manuscripts dating back as far as the thirteenth century. Other smaller libraries and private collections held many more. Until last week, the total number of historic manuscripts in Timbuktu and its surrounding region was estimated at about two hundred thousand.

Because I had seen them, and because it hurts physically each time our collective patrimony is savaged, I felt personally hurt by the early reports that one, two, or all of the famed libraries of Timbuktu had disappeared. Later, it was also reported that a man had been burned alive for yelling “*Vive la France!*” shortly before the final onslaught, and that the city’s town hall had been destroyed by fire, together with the governor’s office.

The mayor of Timbuktu, Halle Ousmane Cissé, has for the last ten months sought refuge in Mali’s capital city, Bamako, and even he only possesses second-hand information. Since the beginning of the French intervention, phone and power lines have been down in Timbuktu. Last Sunday, however, Cissé received a phone call from his communications attaché, who had just been able to escape the city. He was told that the Ahmed Baba Centre had

burned, and that more than half of its manuscripts had been consumed in the fire. “What is happening in Timbuktu is dramatic,” Cissé told the French press yesterday. “This is a cultural crime perpetrated against world heritage.” Yet he also seemed to hint that not all of the city’s manuscripts had been destroyed.

Jean-Michel Djian, a French writer who specializes in West African culture, and is author of a recent book, “The Manuscripts of Timbuktu,” confirmed by phone last night that parts of the various collections were safe. “The great majority of the manuscripts, about fifty thousand, are actually housed in the thirty-two family libraries of the ‘City of 333 Saints,’ ” he said. “Those are to this day protected.” Djian also revealed that Abdel Kader Haidara, the owner of his family’s “Mamma Haidara” library, had transported, two months ago, more than fifteen thousand of its manuscripts to the capital city in order to protect them. Djian said that the same was true of the several thousand manuscripts of the Kati Foundation in Timbuktu. “The rest,” he added with a crack in his voice, “is unknown.”

In April, 2012, Timbuktu, once the great spiritual capital of Africa, was assaulted by two rival Tuareg rebel groups: the nationalists who declared secession in Northern Mali, and the Islamists of Andar Eddine who have sought to implement Sharia law. A couple of months later, insurgents from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (A.Q.I.M.) came in and wrested control from the other groups. They demolished most of the Sufi shrines, banning them as idolatrous, smashed the statue of a man astride a winged horse, flew their black flag, and began a régime of terror.

Since the fifteenth century, Timbuktu had been an epicenter of commerce on the trans-Saharan caravan route, but also, thanks to its thriving mosque and university, an oasis of learning and literacy. Founded between the eleventh and twelfth centuries by Tuareg tribes, the city soon housed scholars and scribes within its walls. These scribes copied countless works on topics ranging from political science, history, and theology to astronomy, botany, and poetry. Arabic and, at times, Fulani, Songhai, or Bambara texts were recopied on camel shoulder blades, sheepskins, tree bark, and even papers from Italy. Some were illuminated with gold leaf, with frail calligraphy presenting significant stylistic variations. The surviving manuscripts, including one in Turkish and one in Hebrew, span the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Thus a written history of Africa was constructed, including the wondrous “Tarikh Al-Sudan,” a storied chronicle of West Africa.

Many of these texts have been preserved in mud homes and rudimentary private libraries, since they represent a prized family heritage. In 1973, the Malian government created the Ahmed Baba Centre, named after a seventeenth-century scholar, to provide adequate care and protection for texts which were otherwise rotting away in trunks and attics, or, in some cases, in desert caves. It was finished in 2009, with funding from UNESCO and South African and other foreign and private sources, and used advanced techniques to attenuate abrasion and other damage. Unfortunately, very few of the manuscripts had been copied electronically. And since many of the areas of knowledge they cover—atomy, erectile dysfunction, women’s rights, medicine, music—are domains traditionally despised by Islamists, the Ahmed Baba Centre had several times been ransacked by armed men, though no damage had yet been done to the manuscripts themselves.

Last spring, the magazine *Jeune Afrique* reported that curators and private collectors were already organizing themselves to conceal the most important documents. Families spontaneously followed course on their own accounts. According to some manuscript-conservation specialists, it is believed that these libraries bring “*baraka*” (“good luck”), and that dismantling them attracts misfortune. Besides, many of these texts (or jottings in the margins of the manuscripts) contain family secrets, correspondences, accounts, and diaries, owing to the fact that most of Timbuktu’s inhabitants, including its skilled-craftsman class, were literate since the fifteenth century. To this day, the Tuaregs are reluctant to give away secrets such as the possible Jewish ancestry of some eminent families of Timbuktu, or evidence of extra-marital affairs involving illegitimate descendants. But locals have reported that Islamists were loath to enter private houses—most likely for fear of being “polluted”—and this has helped the conservation of significant parts of the city’s legendary heritage, at least so far. In West Africa, there is a saying that every time an elder dies, a library burns with him. The disappearance of even a section of the city’s ancient libraries conversely represents no less than the death by fire of old and ancient men and women who had so far pursued, with us and between themselves, a quiet but

immemorial dialogue.

Lila Azam Zanganeh's first book, "The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness," was just published by Norton / US and Penguin / UK.

Photograph by Horst Friedrichs/Anzenberger/Redux.