

# An Analysis of the Strategies Employed to Curate, Conserve and Digitize the Timbuktu Manuscripts

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**Abstract**—This paper briefly reviews the range of curatorial interventions made to preserve and display the Timbuktu Manuscripts. The government of South Africa and Mali collaborated to preserve the manuscripts, and brief notes will be presented about the value of archives in those specific spaces. The research initiatives of the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project, based at the University of Cape Town, feature prominently in the text. A brief overview of the history of the archive will be presented and its preservation as a key turning point in curating the intellectual history of the continent. The strategies of preservation, curation, publication and digitization are presented as complimentary interventions. Each materialization of the manuscripts contributes something significant; the complexity of the contribution is dependent primarily on the format of presentation. This integrated reading of the manuscripts is presented as a means to gain a more nuanced understanding of the past, which greatly surpasses how much information would be gleaned from relying on a single media format.

**Keywords**—Archive, curatorship, cultural heritage, museum practice, Timbuktu manuscripts.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE primary research interest of this paper is the range of interventions made to preserve and display the Timbuktu Manuscripts. These actions are intended to create points of contact or engagement with the archive, however given the size of the archive, there are limitations to what can be addressed in a single paper. Thus, the discussion of these gestures is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather provide sufficient information to enable the analysis proposed in this study. These gestures are intended to activate these items within a framework of cultural and historical importance through a variety of strategies that indicate its position as a dynamic object that was part of the cultural identity of a particular time and place. It is crucial to avoid thinking of these manuscripts as static objects within a special collection or a library but instead to recall their value with a clear understanding of the manuscripts as both a method to generate

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and disseminate knowledge. The history of the Timbuktu manuscripts has been well documented in publications [1]-[4], [6], [15], [16]; therefore while it is useful to account for the provenance of the manuscripts, a full historical account will not be the primary focus of this text. The goal of this paper is to present each materialization of the manuscripts as a significant contribution to a more nuanced understanding of the traces of the past.

## II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Timbuktu manuscripts are recognized by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre as a collection with an extremely high level of cultural and historical value. The manuscripts date from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and provide evidence of a complex negotiation of the written and spoken languages in West Africa [1]. The manuscripts are primarily written in Arabic but some manuscripts feature annotations in local vernaculars like Songhay, Tamasheq, Fululde, Fulani, Soninke and Bamana [2], [3]. One of the oldest items in the collection is a Qu'ran from the thirteenth century that is considered too fragile to digitize [1]. The topics covered include mathematics, language, astrology, medicine, finance, physical sciences, natural sciences, theology, literature, law and a range of ephemera related to the context of production. The manuscripts are thus a key account of the knowledge that was in circulation at the time and also offer us an understanding of the complex inter-cultural engagement that was common to that historical period. As Jeppie so eloquently states: “Timbuktu is a repository of history, a living archive which anybody with a concern for African history should be acquainted with” [1:3].

The manuscripts were stored in a network of private libraries dispersed throughout West Africa. These manuscripts belong to the people living in the region, for centuries they were considered part of the social and cultural fabric of that specific society. When discussing the value of the manuscripts Leo Africanus' 16th century text is often referenced which noted that the sales of books and manuscripts in the region was more profitable than any other goods at the time [4]. The manuscripts were also considered to confer social status to specific individuals and families depending on the content and quality of their manuscript collection. There are a few key properties that need to be indicated in the context of this specific collection before an analysis of the central topics can be discussed.

The first point is the near incomprehensible size of the manuscript collection – although there is no inventory or catalogue listing every single manuscript in the collection –

300,000 is often presented as the estimated total number of manuscripts in the collection. Given the unprecedented size of the collection it is deeply problematic to misrepresent it as a hegemonic mass and not the culturally complex treasure trove of knowledge it is widely considered to be. Thus, it is common practice for scholars to identify a specific portion of the collection in order to ground their papers in facts rather than generalizations, this strategy will be implemented in this paper as well and specific collections will be indicated at relevant points to provide sufficient context for the discussion.

Secondly; unlike many other international manuscript collections that are housed in a single venue, the manuscripts are dispersed across a wide range of personal libraries with a small selection of the manuscripts made available through documentation, publication or digitization. In addition, the movement of the manuscripts since their initial discovery across the continent has made this collection quite complex to grasp. Unlike many other manuscript collections, this is an archive that resists the singularity easily attributed to many other collections. The tradition of copying the manuscripts by hand numerous times since the first draft was inked is another complication that leads to the inappropriateness of the term 'original' in the context of these manuscripts. Jeppie, citing Louis Brenner, explains that authors did not prioritize signing or dating their works because the contemporary cult of fame, individual authorship and worldly recognition was not the primary motivation for drafting these texts [1]. Lastly, the annotations in the margins of the manuscripts add a complication to the traditional notion of authorship. Literas notes that "[m]arginalia related to the text, such as corrections, addenda, clarifications, commentaries and highlights are quite common and share certain characteristics" in the West African Manuscripts from the Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library Collection in Timbuktu [5]. That paper provides significant evidence of the value of studying the marginalia of the manuscripts to gain a broader understanding of the complexity of the archive. The combination of these multiple factors makes the Timbuktu manuscripts a rather complex research subject to engage. These manuscripts are referred to as the 'tin trunk literacy' of the continent [2] due to the storage methods utilized by the custodians of the manuscripts. Given the size and dispersal of the manuscripts, there are a range of conditions to be accounted for and generally these conditions do not quite match contemporary opinions of appropriate archival care. Within the last two decades there have been numerous articles in the popular media [6]-[9] detailing the passage of the manuscripts across borders and the various dangers to these cultural traces of the past. The reports generally created a sense of urgency regarding the contemporary value of the manuscripts and emphasized the need to make a concerted effort to ensure its preservation as a resource for future generations. Given the level of publicity these narratives have already been afforded, the core focus of this paper will remain on the strategies of curation employed to preserve and present the manuscripts to contemporary audiences.

Authors like Jeppie and Diagne [1], Garaba [3], Molin-

Literas [5] and many others note that the manuscripts act as a counter to flawed perceptions of African intellectual traditions. The vast collection of knowledge contained in the manuscripts subverts the pejorative Western claims that the continent did not anchor its past to a written account of its history and knowledge and only relied on the transmission of oral accounts from generation to generation [1], [3], [5]. This notion of self-authorship is key in understanding why this particular collection of manuscripts is regarded as a treasure trove of African intellectual prowess and is deemed crucial to preserve.

The tradition of a local archive, preserved by the residents passed from one generation to the next, is different to the curatorial model of a formal public archive. Within the context of Timbuktu it is important to note that the majority of the collections were housed in private libraries, and the primary public institution is the Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Research. This research center was created in 1970 and started massive renovations in the early 2000s. It was designed to be a hub of cultural activity for the community and includes administration offices, an amphitheater, a library and a conservation office. Its status as a place of public access, presentation and preservation of the manuscripts is unique. It is crucial to acknowledge the vast difference between the operational logic of this institution (a public facing institution) and the most common storage methods (a private collection). While some of the manuscripts were 'rescued' from their domestic contexts, it is critical to note that that leads to an altered relationship to the material artifact. It not only places the archival object at a distance, but also requires a serious infrastructural and logistical cost. The renovations to the Ahmed Baba Institute were estimated to cost between R50,000000-R60,000000 to construct [3].

The manuscript collections accessible to the public according to the *Tombouctou* Manuscripts Project are listed in Table I.

TABLE I  
PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS [6]

Library	Date Opened	No. of Mss.
Ahmed Baba Institute	1973	30000
Mamma Haidara	1996	9000
Fondo Ka'ti	1999	7026
Al-Wangari	2003	3000
Imam Soyuti	2004	800
Jingere-Ber	2004	500

### III. CURATING HISTORY

This case study will provide a very brief review of how continental archives are valued in Africa, specifically Mali and South Africa. As indicated earlier the Timbuktu Manuscripts are held in very high regard across the continent and are celebrated as a unique collection in the intellectual history of the continent. The 'African Renaissance' campaign was part of President Thabo Mbeki's strategy to emphasize the value of cultural heritage during his tenure as the leader of South Africa. This was a very particular moment in South African

history, when a large focus was placed on the rebirth of Africa as a place of the future with an often-unacknowledged past filled with a myriad of accomplishments to be celebrated by its people. The South Africa-Mali project was a collaborative effort by African countries to preserve the manuscripts, as well as an intentional shift away from collaboration with Western powers. That specific endeavor sought to develop a culture of training and development at the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu. Training was provided in the field of preservation and conservation to extend the life of the manuscripts. Funds were raised from the public and private sector to make a significant change in the cultural awareness of the importance of the manuscripts. Financial support was provided for scholars to visit the region and for construction projects linked to the preservation project.

In addition to the governmental interest, the manuscripts were also considered valuable by specific researchers and academics like the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project based at the University of Cape Town. This entailed a range of projects highlighting the contemporary value of the manuscripts and brought significantly more awareness to the collection. Individuals who made a significant contribution to the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project are Shamil Jeppie, Susana Molins Lliteras, Rifqah Kahn, Hassen Muhammed Kawo, Ebrahiem Moos, Mauro Nobili and Shabnam Parker.

There are numerous public institutions in the region that play an active part in the preservation projects – like the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library, the Ahmed Baba Institute, The Association pour la Sauvegarde et la Valorisation des Manuscrits pour la Défense de la Culture Islamique (SAVAMA--DCI) and the Association des Bibliothèques pour le Soutien et la Promotion des Initiatives à Tombouctou (ABISOPI). The process of digitization and preservation of the manuscripts have been complex and featured the assistance of numerous global partners. The Islamic Manuscripts Association (TIMA), the Centre for Contemporary Islam, the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA), Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, the Doen Foundation and the Ford Foundation have also made contributions to the preservation efforts. The University of Hamburg, Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), the Gerda Henkel Foundation (GHS) and the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Auswärtiges Amt) initiated a project to ensure the longevity of the manuscript collection that was displaced. In addition, key players also utilized crowd funding through Indigogo called T160K to generate support for the manuscript collection. These initiatives to preserve the Timbuktu Manuscripts have become the primary narrative regarding its place in history, but the attention devoted to the manuscripts has also created a parallel narrative. Russo and Bondarev draw attention to the fact that there is a risk that the Timbuktu Libraries overshadow other manuscript collections in the region [2]. Given its iconic status in the world it is already significantly more present in the public imagination than any other collections; which is problematic because Timbuktu was not the only African city with a rich intellectual tradition. Abyssinia (currently Ethiopia) was another prolific city of

scholars and there are also traces in the Sahara, in Senegal and in Northern Moçambique. Thus, it is useful to note the disproportionate level of importance, and media coverage, assigned to the Timbuktu manuscripts at the expense of smaller lesser known manuscript collections. Garaba notes the fact that we can perceive the priorities, and to some extent ideologies, of the parties involved by virtue of what is funded; and by proxy what is not funded [3]. A local example would be the emphasis that was placed on the Timbuktu manuscripts, yet in 2014 the *State of the Archives Report* prepared by the Archival Platform indicated that the national and provincial archives of South Africa were in serious need of refurbishment, and reorganization [7]. Within this context, the value of the manuscripts is not only related to their content, but also how they relate to the ideology of the time. Another example would be an article by Dick ‘Reacting to Timbuktu’, that critiques the outrage expressed at the destruction of the Timbuktu Manuscripts by librarians and reporters, by pointing out that between 2009-2013, 15 public libraries were destroyed in South Africa without much public attention [8]. While the historical value of these two collections is vastly different, it does pose interesting questions about how the public values knowledge. These contestations of the coverage of the archive is not meant to denigrate its value or significance in any way, but only meant to indicate the wider field of relevant manuscripts that exist. This problem has not gone unnoticed by the scholars and is one of the primary reasons why the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project made a concerted effort to develop more awareness about other manuscripts – for example their research in the Jenne region. This is the same reason why the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library initiated a project to digitize the manuscripts in the Sherif Harar City Museum in Ethiopia, Zaydi manuscripts from Yemen as well as manuscripts from The Raja of Mahmudabad Library in India [9].

#### IV. MEDIATED MANUSCRIPTS

The primary argument in this section is that each mode of presentation detailed below draws the reader’s attention to a specific set of properties that allow the object to speak to different facets of its complex history. Kropf makes an excellent argument for engaging the archival object as well as its reproductions in order to gain a more complete understanding of the past, this requires that the reader remains receptive of the specific elements that each mode of mediation communicates most effectively [10]. This analogy should be extended to all the other modes of engagement linked to the manuscript in the contemporary moment, which will be argued in this section. These presentations offer extremely different ways to encounter the manuscript – as an isolated archival object, as a visual object, as an exhibition object, as a book object and as a digital object. This range of media echoes van Lit’s formulation of the manuscript as a multi-directional object that links us to the past in a unique manner [11], and these presentations are magnifying the intensity of that link to the past by allowing us to regard it through a range of materialities. The first mode is as an archival object that has

been preserved as a rarefied object placed within certain conditions to preserve its material integrity. This object has moved through time parallel to the history of the world and presents that journey to the reader. Access to the object is restricted due to the travel required to come into close proximity to the item within a geographical location and archival site. Given the complexity of traveling to Timbuktu [1], this is a major contributing factor to the reliance readers have on reproductions of the archival object in the other modes discussed below. Under the appropriate conditions, if access is acquired through travel and the appropriate permissions are secured, the reader is able to view the object and have a tactile encounter with the collections. This is primarily the domain of the librarians of Timbuktu, scholars and the preservationists that are attempting to protect the documents from the ravages of time. There are notable complications to this formulation when the manuscript shifts from one region to another, changes owners or crosses geographical borders.

The second encounter bears the visual likeness of the archival object but was created through an image generation process – that duplicates its entirety in a single gesture as opposed to the sequential generation process of its creation. This creates a slight dissonance between the state we encountered the object in as opposed to the source of the image that is circulated to represent it. To understand this shift it will be useful to explain in slightly more detail why it is important to regard the materiality of the object with such care. Readers should remain sensitive to the production of the handwritten manuscript through *s/t/r/o/k/e/-/b/y/-/s/t/r/o/k/e/* production as opposed to the entirety captured in a single scan or photograph [12]. It is also crucial to acknowledge that the tradition of the hand-written manuscripts extended far beyond the invention of the printing press, and subsequent developments in the production of the codex. There is a material specificity to this particular collection of text on wafer-thin paper, bound in leather and secreted away to preserve it for centuries, that clearly demarcates its time of creation. Pre-digital interventions to document the collection utilized photographs, photocopies as well as microfiche, each mode of media hampered by certain specifications. These modes of preservation all require another platform for publication, distribution and reception thus each mode is linked to the problematic issue of ‘access’ in some way. It should be noted that we regard some of these modes of reproduction as obsolescent due to technological and industrial advancements, yet at the time of its implementation it was the primary modes for creating images of archival objects.

In ‘The Manuscript After the Coming of Print’, Love notes that in contemporary times the hand-written word is linked with ephemera like shopping lists, to-do-lists or notes taken in a meeting or a class [13]. This is completely different to its function in previous centuries; specifically the pre-digital era. The first facsimiles of manuscripts and books were made by hand because no other technology existed to reproduce those texts. In later years engraving, color lithography, darkroom photography and digital photography were used to replicate

fragile manuscripts across the globe [14]. Given the cumbersome nature of the printing technology as well as the complexities of typesetting there was a notable resistance to adopting that as a mode of production. The tradition of *s/t/r/o/k/e/-/b/y/-/s/t/r/o/k/e/* reproduction a text was also considered more appropriate for some texts, for example devout believers often preferred to acquire a hand-written prayer-book instead of a book printed with movable type. In later years engraving, color lithography, darkroom photography and digital photography were used to replicate fragile manuscripts across the globe [14].

The third manifestation is the public presentation of 40 manuscripts of the Ahmed Baba Institute in the *Timbuktu Script & Scholarship' Exhibition* (2008) at the Iziko Castle of Good Hope [15]. In this specific case the manuscripts travelled from West Africa, to the Western Cape and then to other sites in South Africa. When exhibited the object is removed from its context of creation, but also its preservation, and presented to the reader to allow communion with the past. It is important to always acknowledge that the museum object although presented for visual inspection remains separated from tactile engagement through its placement within the vitrine. This enclosure separates the object from the transactional utility it may have had as a tool to educate and engage a range of topics, it attempts to fix the object in place and present a specific view of the object to the reader. The presentation emphasizes the value of the artifact by virtue of the curatorial choices made to craft an aesthetic and informative experience. It is important to note that within this formulation the object is thus seen through the lens of the curatorial vision of the individuals involved in the conceptualization and installation of the exhibition. Since that initial exhibition the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project has sought to situate the Timbuktu manuscripts within the broader manuscript tradition of the continent. An additional exhibition *From Istanbul to Timbuktu: Ink Routes* (2009) at the Gold of Africa Museum featured calligraphers from Spain, Turkey as well as Timbuktu [16]. These manuscripts were used frequently as a subject to study and a form of tangible heritage that shifted in meaning and value over time. Separating it from the daily circulation is a necessary step given the historical value of the manuscripts, especially the more fragile documents dated centuries ago. Taking this archival object and then presenting it in the museum context requires that it is considered slightly differently to a text that can be interpreted, annotated and recirculated – through its presentation the reader is encouraged to think of it as a slightly different type of object. This is important not only to acknowledge with reference to the exhibition, but also its preservation within the Ahmed Baba Institute which significantly shifts the way the object was seen and preserved. While this is indeed a much more archivally sound way to regard these objects, while providing access abroad, it is important to note the specific elements that constitute the particularities of its display within a curated space

There are two notable books in relation to the discussion regarding the mediations of the archive - *Timbuktu: Script and*

*Scholarship* (2008) and *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (2008). The *Timbuktu: Script and Scholarship* catalogue accompanied the *Script and Scholarship* exhibition and extends this discussion by allowing the reader a more intimate view of the complexity of the cultural objects that were placed on display [15]. The pairing of the catalogue with the exhibition is fascinating, because unlike the traditional artists' catalogue, the tasks for the creators were not just to create a space within the printed work for the manuscripts on exhibit – but they were also challenged to convey the import of the entirety of the archive through their engagement.

*The Meanings of Timbuktu* (2008), edited by Jeppie and Diagne, is an expansive text that traces the manuscript tradition of Timbuktu and pairs it with various thematic interpretations of the broader historical legacy of Africa as a place of intellectual development [1]. Jeppie undertook the mammoth task of introducing the manuscript tradition, the history of the region, the way the manuscripts were 'rediscovered' and the lengthy process of preserving these ancient artifacts and making it accessible. Jeppie writes with nuance and candor about the complexity of navigating the geography, socio-political factors, environmental conditions and the historical value of the manuscripts. 24 essays were included in the final publication and presented in thematic groupings in relation to the manuscripts' global impact and cultural significance [1]. These contributions elucidate the intricate link between the socio-political and economic development of the region and makes it much clearer how these manuscripts came into being. This is an extremely useful resource for any scholar interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the history of the manuscript collection.

The book format presents a notable intellectual complication to this argument as it returns the manuscripts to the status of ink on paper, albeit in print not the hand-written word. This is a significant complication with regard to the materiality of the manuscript. Within this format the reproductions of the manuscripts are accompanied by contextual information drafted by the authors to inform the reader of facts that the supposedly 'mute' object cannot. Although the contextual richness of the publication is useful, it often presents a fragment of the entirety of the archive. This limitation is linked to the high cost of producing a text with sufficient paper and ink quality to convey the visual likeness of the manuscript.

The last mode of access for discussion is the digital object, which utilizes technology to create a digital likeness of the archival object. Technically the digitization process occurs before the printing process, given the operational requirements of current design and layout software. Within the context of this investigation this was intentionally left as the final point, because digitization is widely regarded as the most accessible format to engage archival documents. This discussion started with the isolated paper-based object that is only accessible within a specific geographic location, in contrast with this the reader can access the digital object from anywhere in the world. This is subject to the online presentation of the digital object, and the reader having a stable and secure network

connection.

It is important to note that digitization does not take place in a vacuum – in most cases radical interventions need to be made related to infrastructure, equipment and training. In 2013 dehumidifiers and fans were installed in the storage rooms that a portion of the manuscripts were located in and training workshops were presented to the local staff to address the immediate preservation needs of the collection. Through support from the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library and Saint John's University a concerted effort was made to digitize and draft an inventory of the collection. By the first quarter of 2015 33,000 manuscripts from 4 libraries (Infa Yattara, Ahmed Boularaf, Sidi Zeyane, Mamma Haidara) were inventoried; 3,960 archival boxes were crafted for 34,234 manuscripts, and six libraries in Timbuktu were renovated [2]. Additional workshops have been presented to increase the knowledge base of the local conservators as well as developing a long-term plan for the preservation of the archive. By 2020 significant additions have been made to the digitized collection: 7,600 items from the Abdelbokr Bin Said Library, 12,700 items from the Abdullah Abdrahamane Library; 39,000 items from the Attaher Muaz Library and 37,500 items from the Mamma Haidara Library [8].

The digital object is accessed according to predetermined networked paths once it is placed online for the reader. The digital archive is intended to democratize access to the resource without requiring an onerous journey on the part of the reader. In the case of the Timbuktu manuscripts, this access remains quite complicated as the efforts to digitize the collection have been dotted sporadically throughout time. Digitization was done on a case by case basis according to the priorities and technological limitations of the archivists and funders, as well as subject to the extenuating circumstances linked to the need to digitize in each context. The most recent digitization project has followed a clearly structured plan, but the quantity of documents digitized is still a fraction of the overall collection. The advent of the practice of digitization – although initially resisted by many – can be interpreted as an attempt to return the archival object to our daily routine. The ability to read, review and even annotate the manuscripts digitally offers unprecedented ease of access to the data contained in the manuscripts.

## V. CONCLUSION

The primary argument is that the mediations of the Timbuktu manuscripts each place the reader in extremely different positions in relation to the material traces of the past. Each mode of materialization should be interrogated as presenting a particular strategy for the preservation and presentation of the past. As an archival object the manuscripts allow the reader a window to a time that is no longer directly accessible, whereas the multitude of photographic reproductions provided a slightly wider group access to the content with a significant shift in the materiality of the manuscript. The touring exhibition allowed an even wider group of readers to see the manuscripts with a level of physical proximity in various geographic locations, albeit

contained in a vitrine as a precious object. The books produced in relation to the manuscripts allowed a different kind of intimacy with the contextual history of the objects. Allowing the reader to see the manuscripts in a private bookshelf or a public library echoes the private libraries in Timbuktu that preserved the manuscripts for centuries. The text in these publications not only roots the objects in their time of production, but gives the contemporary reader significantly more depth than previous reproductions of isolated manuscripts. The last phase is the digitization of the manuscripts, and although only a small portion of the archive has been digitized, the circulation of that visual information has made the manuscripts significantly more accessible than ever before.

These different perspectives on the Timbuktu manuscripts merge together to present a unique understanding that echoes some of Treharne's sentiments when she states: "Without a multi-sensual embodied experience of the material artifact, we experience only the transcendent, the partial; and we only ever grasp a fragmented and limiting understanding of the book's intrinsic aura" [17:477]. Thus, the reader should consider these objects as items that have not only witnessed the past, but through their preservation and presentation allow us to commune with the past. In conclusion, it remains crucial for the reader to retain an awareness of the specificity of the mode in which the archival objects are encountered. Readers must however avoid thinking of these manuscripts as static objects within a special collection or a library, but instead recall their value as a dynamic method to generate and disseminate knowledge in the past and the present.

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