

Cultural Heritage at Risk in Mali: The Destruction of Timbuktu's Mausoleums of Saints

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**CULTURAL HERITAGE AT RISK IN
MALI: THE DESTRUCTION OF
TIMBUKTU'S MAUSOLEUMS OF
SAINTS**

Lazare Eloundou Assomo

From January to December 2012, Mali experienced serious threats to its rich cultural heritage. The country's northern region, where two of the four Malian sites inscribed on the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List are located, was occupied by armed Islamist groups: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), and Ansar Dine. The occupied territory reached as far as the Cliff of Bandiagara, an area known as the Land of the Dogons. During the occupation, the armed groups attacked and damaged cultural heritage and cultural expressions intentionally and methodically. They also seized Timbuktu, attacking the city's tangible and intangible heritage with the aim of spreading fear and promoting radical extremism. Fourteen of the city's sixteen mausoleums of the saints inscribed on the World Heritage List were completely destroyed, three mosques were severely damaged, and 4,203 ancient manuscripts burned. Other tangible cultural heritage was also damaged, such as the El Farouk independence monument, along with much of the basic services infrastructure and houses in the city center.

The government called upon the international community, and UNESCO in particular, for help. Nevertheless, armed groups continued their destruction from 30 June to 2 July 2012, while the thirty-sixth session of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, composed of representatives from the organization's member states, was being held in Saint Petersburg to raise awareness of the dramatic situation. The

international community was shocked by the deliberate destruction of the mausoleums, which was covered widely in the international media.

The World Heritage Committee placed the two remaining World Heritage Sites on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger and appealed to the international community to assist the Malian government and affected local communities. UNESCO also launched a series of initiatives in response to the calls by Mali and the Committee. First was the organization of an international experts meeting, held on 18 February 2013, which resulted in the adoption of a Final Report and Action Plan for the Rehabilitation of Cultural Heritage and the Safeguarding of Ancient Manuscripts in Mali.¹ This enabled planning for the reconstruction of the destroyed mausoleums, the rehabilitation of the Sidi Yahia and Djingareyber Mosques, and the conservation and safeguarding of ancient manuscripts.

UNESCO also launched an awareness-raising campaign regarding the cultural significance of the mausoleums to the social and religious life of Timbuktu's communities. The campaign contributed to the adoption of a series of resolutions by the UN Security Council strongly condemning the destruction of Malian cultural and religious sites and urging the international community to take appropriate actions to ensure the protection of the country's tangible cultural heritage. Among these actions was resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013.² This established the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and outlined support for the preservation of cultural sites in partnership with UNESCO. The resolution also recognized the important role played by local populations in facilitating efforts to establish a national dialogue to resolve the Malian conflict. These two aspects of the resolution positioned the reconstruction of the mausoleums in Timbuktu as a part of the peacebuilding process from the community level to the local, national, and international levels.

UNESCO also cooperated with the International Criminal Court (ICC) to facilitate the investigation of the intentional destruction of the mausoleums. This resulted in the confirmation of war crime charges against Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, a member of Ansar Dine, who was sentenced on 27 September 2016 to nine years in prison for intentionally directing attacks against historical monuments and buildings, including nine mausoleums and one mosque in Timbuktu.

Understanding Timbuktu's Cultural Heritage

Timbuktu is said to have been founded toward the end of the Hegira (Muhammad's departure from Mecca to Medina in 622) by a group of Imakcharen Tuaregs, a regional tribal group. With a remarkable geostrategic position at the crossroads between sub-Saharan and North Africa and along the Niger River, the city developed as part of the trans-Saharan trade route, becoming the most prestigious intellectual and scientific center in what is known as the African Middle Ages (1400–1800). Its prestigious Koranic University of Sankoré attracted numerous scholars, explorers, and the adventurous, and



Figure 14.1 Aerial photo of Timbuktu Image: © UNESCO / Serge Negre

became the intellectual measure of West Africa as well as an important center for the propagation of Islam throughout Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its three great mosques at Djingareyber, Sankoré, and Sidi Yahia recall Timbuktu's golden age during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (fig. 14.1).³

Established as a municipality in 1958, Timbuktu covers an area of nearly twenty-one square kilometers.⁴ Before its occupation by extremist groups in 2012, it had about 9,500 houses, and a very diverse and cosmopolitan population comprising Songhoï, Tuareg, Bozo, Somonos, Moorish, Arab, Bambara, Fulani, and Dogon communities, constituting an estimated 54,500 people. It is located mainly along Niger River wetlands, an area well suited to agriculture.

Timbuktu's old city, also called Medina, with an area of fifty-four hectares, displays a compact, irregular plan, including the Badjindé, Sankoré, Djingareyber, and Sareikena districts, and serves as an administrative center. It evolved around the city's main public square, Al Farouk, now located at its entrance. It largely consists of one to two story buildings overlooking narrow streets on one side and interior courtyards on the other. Timbuktu is known for its exceptional earthen architecture, particularly the mosques and mausoleums of saints spread across the city. This architecture has been kept alive for centuries thanks to recurrent traditional maintenance work by locals, who gather to undertake collective mud replastering.⁵ Carried out under the guidance of the masons corporation, this work has an important spiritual and social meaning for the local community.

Crafts and tourism represent the main activities and sources of income of Timbuktu's population, thanks not only to the city's rich and diverse historical and cultural heritage,

but also to its dynamic artistic and creative scene. The most prominent crafts are related to textiles (55 percent of craftspersons before 2012 were tailors and 9 percent embroiderers), jewelry (12 percent), and shoemaking (5 percent); others include carpentry, basketry, forging, tapestry making, and arts and crafts related to the conservation of manuscripts. Before the occupation of the city, more than 50 percent of craft businesses in Northern Mali were located in Timbuktu. And it is estimated that two-thirds of the population made a living in this sector, with each family counting at least one craftsperson. Other economic activities were agriculture, including the growing of rice, millet, sorghum, and wheat, and the breeding of bovines, ovines, goats, and camels, as well as traditional fishing along the Niger. The booming pre-occupation tourism industry also employed, directly or indirectly, more than five hundred people.

In 1988, three of the city's major mosques (Djingareyber, Sidi Yahia, and Sankoré) and sixteen of its saint mausoleums were inscribed on the World Heritage List.⁶ These remarkable buildings played a major role in spreading Sufi Islam throughout Africa and are testimony to the golden age of this wealthy, spiritual, and cultural city. The mosques were built between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and were restored for the first time in the sixteenth century. The Djingareyber Mosque, the largest in the city and known as the "Friday mosque," constitutes one of Timbuktu's most visible landmarks (fig. 14.2). Although of more modest size, the Sankoré and Sidi Yahia are equally important.

Mausoleums of saints were first built in the thirteenth century by Timbuktu's local communities as a tribute to their ancestors for their exemplary role in the intellectual, social, and religious life of the city. These were initially places for prayer and invocation



Figure 14.2 Djingareyber Mosque, built in 1325 Image: © UNESCO

of ancestors that later became pilgrimage sites for devotees from Mali, North Africa, and the Middle East. Timbuktu is equally famous for its ancient manuscripts, eloquent proof of the city's intellectual, cultural, and scientific development. Estimated to total more than four hundred thousand volumes, they are distributed over the city through its public library, the Ahmed Baba Institute.

The importance of the city's cultural heritage was recognized in the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Mali signed on 15 May and 20 June 2015.⁷ It includes various measures aimed at promoting better participation of Northern Mali's communities, taking into account their cultural diversity by establishing a special development zone for the North.

The disastrous consequences of the 2012 attacks on its cultural heritage also led to a significant decline in Timbuktu's economy. Crafts and tourism, previously comprising the city's greatest source of income, were severely harmed during the occupation by the absence of foreign visitors. The city also faced massive displacement as its population fled the armed groups, aggravating the people's trauma and lowering their standard of living.

The Mausoleums: Cultural Destruction, Trauma, and Response

The UNESCO international expert meeting of 18 February 2013 was instrumental in generating a broader awareness of the strong attachment of Timbuktu's communities to their cultural heritage. The occupiers sought to erase all cultural references that linked its inhabitants to the religious practices of Sufism, which they banned and which the city's population had practiced since the ninth century. The population interpreted these moves by Ansar Dine as punitive, and the destruction of the mausoleums as a direct attack on their cultural identity.

The occupiers attempted to terrorize the population and spread an ideology of violent extremism and radicalization. The communities had considered the mausoleums and mosques as central to their identity, linking them to Timbuktu's world-renowned history, to their ancestors, and to each other. They described mausoleums and ancient manuscripts as the "lungs" of their social life—without them, it would be difficult to recover from the trauma caused by the occupation.

With this understanding, it was agreed that an initial damage assessment mission would be conducted by a joint team of international and Malian experts. This was undertaken between 29 May and 2 June 2013 with the objectives of first evaluating the damage done to the city's cultural heritage and then determining priority actions for its rehabilitation and conservation. Experts from various international organizations as well as from the Malian Ministry of Culture carried out extensive investigations, confirming the destruction of fourteen mausoleums inscribed on the World Heritage List.⁸ Also noted was the destruction of the emblematic El Farouk monument and the loss of an estimated 4,203 ancient manuscripts. Importantly, the damage assessment



Figure 14.3 Destroyed Alpha Moya mausoleum Image: © UNESCO

mission concluded that the trauma inflicted on local communities by this heritage destruction was equally consequential (fig. 14.3).

Much work was then carried out, including the collection and consultation of archives, historical information, architectural and archaeological surveys, excavation records, and the compilation of traditional building practices and techniques through consultation with the masons corporation, whose members alone possessed the ancestral knowledge needed to undertake the required mausoleum reconstruction. Understanding the state of thousands of ancient manuscripts was also part of the damage assessment: some three hundred thousand had been removed from the city, mainly to Mali's capital, Bamako, in addition to the more than four thousand known to be missing.

As mentioned, the destruction of cultural heritage and the prohibition on local cultural practices had significantly harmed the large proportion of the local economy based on cultural activities. There were no craft or tourism activities in 2012 and 2013. Craft products available in stores remained unsold, and vandals trashed craftspeople's installations, equipment, and materials. Timbuktu had registered 1,191 day trippers and 2,267 overnight stays by international and national tourists in 2011, compared to none in 2012, with all its hotels closed.

Thousands of the city's inhabitants also fled to Bamako or neighboring countries, while others stopped working. An estimated eighty percent of public employees left their positions and sixty percent of craftspeople were displaced. Other activities were interrupted as well as youth and women fled, as did development actors as a result of

the suspension of public development aid and the consequent shutdown of investment projects.

Many public buildings were damaged, with virtually all schools pillaged or destroyed. It is estimated that at least ninety-four thousand children in the region were unable to attend school during the conflict.⁹ In 2013, about fifty-three percent of primary school teachers were still present, compared with less than nine percent of secondary school teachers and eight percent of those working in vocational and technical education.

The Mausoleums: Reconstruction Strategy

In order to guide the reconstruction process, a series of consultations took place among the main representatives of the local communities and the corporation of traditional masons. These consultations made possible the compilation of traditional building practices and techniques, collected from the masons corporation, who alone possessed the ancestral knowledge necessary to undertake this type of reconstruction. Incorporating the masons in decision-making ensured that the mausoleums would be reconstructed using traditional techniques to preserve the city's architectural integrity. Thanks to data collected during these consultations, knowledge of relevant construction skills was refined, a building site methodology adopted, and a proposal developed to detail the optimal architectural state to be obtained through reconstruction. This data was then incorporated into a reconstruction strategy with local communities at its heart. The strategy was adopted by the Malian government and custodial communities in February 2014, with the latter acting as the official guides for all stages of reconstruction, including the required traditional ritual practices.¹⁰

Reconstruction was undertaken in two phases. In the first phase, spanning 14 March to 15 May 2014, local masons applied the agreed-upon strategy at the two mausoleums located near the Djingareyber Mosque (Sheik Baber Baba Idjè and Sheik Mahamane al-Fulani mausoleums). This pilot phase refined methodologies for the various steps of reconstruction. It encouraged the consolidation of approaches and methods while also documenting the entire reconstruction process. The second phase corresponded to the reconstruction of the twelve remaining mausoleums between February and September 2015. The mausoleums were sanctified during an inauguration ceremony in Timbuktu on 18 July 2015 in the presence of the then director-general of UNESCO, Irina Bokova. On 4 February 2016, a further consecration ceremony took place—a necessary ritual for the families to fully repossess their mausoleums. According to local religious leaders, such a consecration ceremony was last held for the Timbuktu mausoleums in the eleventh century, as no events of mass destruction had taken place in the intervening millennium. The consecration ceremony was intended to invoke divine mercy and provide the basis for peace, cohesion, and tranquility. It began in the early morning with the sacrifice of cows and the reading of Quranic verses, and concluded with the pronouncement of Al-Fatiha (prayers from the Quran) by the imam of the Djingareyber



Figure 14.4 Reconstructed Sidi Ben Amar mausoleum Image: © UNESCO

Mosque. In Timbuktu these religious rites also represent the rejection of intolerance, violent extremism, and religious fundamentalism. This ceremony constituted the last step of Timbuktu’s cultural rebirth after the destruction of the mausoleums (fig. 14.4).

International Justice and Community Reparations

In May 2012, when the first mausoleums of the saints were defaced by Ansar Dine, UNESCO alerted the Malian government to the importance of enforcing the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. Mali had been party to this convention since 1961, making it highly desirable to ratify the convention’s 1999 Second Protocol, which would allow for the enforcement of its Chapter 4 provisions on criminal responsibility and jurisdiction. Mali is also a party to the Rome Statute of the ICC. Conforming with its obligations under Article 14 of the statute, the Malian government referred the situation to the court on 13 July 2012. In its letter, the government considered the destruction of mausoleums, mosques, and churches “serious and massive violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.” Considering these acts to constitute war crimes under the jurisdiction of the ICC, the government requested that those identified be charged with committing these crimes.

The ICC’s Office of the Prosecutor duly opened investigations on 16 January 2013, and the court issued an arrest warrant for Ahmad al-Mahdi on 18 September 2015 “for war crimes of intentionally directing attacks against historic monuments and buildings dedicated to religion, including nine mausoleums and one mosque in Timbuktu, Mali, committed between 30 June 2012 and 10 July 2012.”¹¹ Al-Mahdi was subsequently

surrendered to the ICC by the authorities of Niger and formally charged on 24 March 2016. The ICC based the charges partly on UNESCO's explanation that the mausoleums reflected part of Timbuktu's history and the city's role in the expansion of Islam in Africa. In particular, UNESCO considered that the mausoleums "were of great importance to the people of Timbuktu, who admired them and were attached to them. They reflected their commitment to Islam and played a psychological role to the extent of being perceived as protecting the people of Timbuktu."¹²

Al-Mahdi's trial took place from 22 to 24 August 2016. In an unanimous verdict announced on 27 September, he was found guilty of committing "the war crime of intentionally directing attacks against historic monuments and buildings dedicated to religion, including nine mausoleums and one mosque in Timbuktu, Mali, in June and July 2012."¹³ He was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment. It should be noted that al-Mahdi pled guilty to the destruction of the mausoleums and asked for forgiveness from the people of Timbuktu, which was considered by the court as a mitigating factor.

The ICC issued a reparations order on 17 August 2017 to aid in relieving the suffering caused by al-Mahdi's war crimes, enable Timbuktu's communities and the directly impacted families to recover their dignity, and deter the likelihood of future violations. The order concluded that al-Mahdi was liable for €2.7 million in compensation for individual economic losses and collective reparations for the community of Timbuktu.¹⁴ Noting that he was indigent, the court encouraged the ICC's Trust Funds for Victims to aid those impacted with assistance that would complement the reparations award.

Key Lessons Learned

The role that Timbuktu's mausoleums played in the sociocultural and religious life of the community was a vital factor guiding the reconstruction decision. The participation of local communities proved key to ensuring that the mausoleums regained their sacredness after reconstruction was completed. Placing the local community at the heart of the reconstruction process enabled those directly impacted to retake ownership of their mausoleums through a consecration ceremony on 4 February 2016, marking the end of the final phase of reconstruction.

Preservation of the "outstanding universal value" of Timbuktu's cultural heritage and the need for its sustainable conservation were the foundational principles underlying UNESCO's reconstruction efforts. UNESCO was also aware of the importance of the post-reconstruction period and the value in improving and perpetuating the ancestral building traditions essential for maintaining the mausoleums. To this end, a Maintenance and Conservation Guide was distributed to the managers of the mausoleums and to the traditional stewards, the masons, and other workers. The guide contains combinations of methods and techniques strongly inspired by ancient building practices and enriched by technical contributions, to facilitate adaptation of this knowledge to conditions of climate change in the Sahel region.

Finally, the sentencing of al-Mahdi to nine years in prison and the recognition—for the first time in the history of international criminal justice—of the intentional destruction of communal cultural heritage as a war crime provides clear recognition that attacks on cultural heritage are now serious crimes under international law and that perpetrators must and will be held accountable. The verdict signals unequivocally that there is no impunity when cultural heritage is attacked and destroyed.

After the occupation of Timbuktu it was possible to demonstrate that cultural heritage could play a crucial role in reconstructing a stable and prosperous society. The reconstruction of mausoleums helped the affected communities restore their sense of dignity and autonomy by healing their trauma and wounds, making their lives worth living, and reinforcing their social cohesion. Placing the local communities at the heart of the reconstruction process enabled the creation of a framework of inclusive dialogue. Although the communities of Timbuktu were prevented by Ansar Dine from preserving their specific practices of Islam while maintaining their local beliefs and spirituality, this UNESCO initiative has proven to be fully consistent with all international efforts to support the national peacebuilding process.

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