

Reacting to Timbuktu

Archie L Dick

University of Pretoria

Abstract

Comments posted on the website of the Library and Information Association of South Africa regarding the destruction of a library in Timbuktu are analyzed to reveal how we talk about the preservation and destruction of libraries, books, and manuscripts.

Keywords

Communication, destruction, digitization, manuscripts, preservation, Timbuktu

Corresponding author

Archie L Dick, Professor, Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria, Lynnwood Road, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa, 0002.

archie.dick@up.ac.za

Library and information professionals responded both courageously and curiously to threats and the ultimate destruction by fire of the library of the Ahmed Baba Institute of Islamic Advanced Studies and Research in Timbuktu on 28 January 2013. Malian librarians had helped to save the majority of the precious manuscripts in a pre-emptive rescue mission, although about two thousand may have been lost in the fire (Biles 2013; McConnell 2013). From the international library community there was an immediate outpouring of concern on the websites of IFLA and national library associations, as well as on social networking sites.

How events in Timbuktu were reported to librarians across the world, and their responses, are themes worth investigating especially for the use of the new social

media to discuss the preservation and destruction of libraries, books, and manuscripts. An analysis of reactions reported on the website of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) reveals some features of how librarians and library officials talk about this topic (Reaction 2013). The case of LIASA is special because the South African government funded the construction of the Ahmed Baba Institute of Islamic Advanced Studies and Research in 2001 to assist Mali to preserve the Timbuktu manuscripts, and because it recently re-committed itself to restoring the damaged Institute and its library (Myburg 2013).

The IFLA and LIASA leadership still take seriously their responsibility of officially communicating newsworthy events to their members in spite of the fact that social media instantly make world events publicly known, often regardless of their veracity. Their communication pattern is the first striking feature of the way in which this story was reported and received. IFLA's announcement acknowledged its membership of the Blue Shield, which works for the protection of the world's cultural heritage. IFLA's promise to provide information to the library community 'on the evolving status of the situation as it is officially verified and confirmed' therefore depended on its liaison with the Blue Shield (Situation in Mali 2013). LIASA, perhaps like other national library associations, followed IFLA's cue in pledging also to keep its members informed of developments.

But these official assurances came after it was discovered that almost all the manuscripts were safe after all. In South Africa, it was a LIASA member that announced this news after an official report had already appeared on the 'Destruction of Timbuktu libraries', precipitating an immediate update by the president (Reaction 2013). Social media and the Internet, it appears, can undermine the credibility of official communication channels even as they are used to correct

and update information. The future safety of the manuscripts still remains a vexed issue and the director of the *Tombouctou Manuscripts Project* in South Africa believes that the preservation of the manuscripts has to be solved politically (Walt 2013). A second feature of the LIASA member reactions is the absence of the political dimension of preservation.

Instead, digitization offers the solution in more than one librarian's response, expressing both 'solace' and relief that those manuscript collections that were digitized will remain preserved (Reaction 2013). The National Library of South Africa (NLSA) announced in its reaction statement that it had recently signed an agreement to act as IFLA's International Centre for Preservation and Conservation (PAC) for the Southern African Region, as well as Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. This move continues the NLSA's efforts to provide technical facilities and training to Malian conservators and heritage professionals that date back to 2003 (Reaction 2013).

In its endorsement of the IFLA agreement, the NLSA also adopts the 'digitisation route' to solving the problem of the preservation of the Timbuktu manuscripts, as represented in the collaboration between the IFLA PAC Office and the Blue Shield. By side-stepping the political dimension of preservation, however, a long-term solution is doubtful. This is apparent from the general lack of trust by ordinary Malians in government initiatives, and their own efforts to preserve the manuscripts for centuries despite invasions and migrations. As a result, the locals have been 'extremely reluctant to give their manuscripts over for safekeeping or even to loan them for brief periods to be digitized' (Walt 2013).

In the end, the preservation of Timbuktu's manuscripts may not depend on the digitization hopes of the IFLA and NLSA PAC, but on deeply divided Malian politicians. A third feature of the LIASA reactions is the failure to connect the

destruction of the Timbuktu library with the destruction of libraries in South Africa. One librarian did note the burning of libraries and called for the education of government officials, urging the LIASA president 'to write to [the] Minister of Local Government and [to] raise concern so as to stop or minimize these barbaric acts' (Reaction 2013). There was no further comment on this response.

To its credit, LIASA has regularly released statements when libraries were destroyed but there has been no comprehensive analysis yet of the scale of this destruction, or of its causes and consequences. Since 2009, fifteen public libraries have been destroyed during protest actions and no charges have been brought against those arrested, leaving the reasons for this behaviour unknown. Gareth van Onselen (2013) asks why is Timbuktu 'sufficient to fuel enough outrage to put pen to paper but an ever-growing culture of knowledge-destruction at home not worthy even of a whisper?' His answer is that for South African officialdom Timbuktu is primarily an African nationalist project – 'an exercise in self-esteem' (Van Onselen 2013).

His argument is vindicated in the response on the LIASA website by the Portfolio Committee on Arts and Culture. The Committee condemns the 'reckless action' in Timbuktu, invoking 'an ethos of cultural revival', and the 'uniqueness of the African identity', and calls on 'proud Africans to actively work together in a bid to protect such cultural symbols' and to 'remain proud of their culture and history' (Reaction 2013).

The actions in Timbuktu and reactions in the South African library community certainly give all librarians pause for thought about how we talk about the preservation and destruction of libraries, books, and manuscripts.

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