

MALI

Cultural Heritage Seriously Damaged by Islamist Rebels

In May 2012 armed groups of Islamist rebels occupied the north of Mali, destroyed 11 of the 16 mausoleums, the doors of the Sidi Yahya mosque in Timbuktu and the tomb of Askia in Gao. The declared intention of the rebels was to stop the community of Timbuktu from adoring their saints (the city of Timbuktu is known as the “city of 333 saints”), which has been done for about 1000 years. At the same time a large number of the famous manuscripts kept in private and public collections in Timbuktu (all in all 300,000 estimated manuscripts) were destroyed, burnt or stolen. According to one source, in Mali’s capital Bamako “the Islamist rebels burnt the manuscripts that they do not agree with. They are not tolerant Muslims. Some of those manuscripts were written by Sufi Muslims and these rebels are not tolerant of that” (press release of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre of January 30, 2013).

Timbuktu’s three major mosques, Djingareyber, Sankore and Sidi Yahya, along with 16 mausoleums were first inscribed on the

Precious manuscripts in Timbuktu (photo: F. Bandarin, 2005)



The mausoleum of Alfa Mobo destroyed by Islamists on July 1, 2012 (photo: AFP)



Men recovering burnt ancient manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Centre for Documentation and Research in Timbuktu (photo: AFP)

World Heritage List in 1988, and the Askia tomb in the city of Gao followed in 2004. As an immediate reaction to the destructions, in July 2012 the World Heritage Committee inscribed both sites on UNESCO’s List of World Heritage in Danger, decided to send a mission to Timbuktu as soon as possible and establish a special fund for Mali, as UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova declared (see article in *Le Devoir*, Montréal, July 14, 2012). UNESCO was instrumental in providing topographic maps and coordinates to the armed forces of Mali, France and Chad to help prevent shelling of these sites.

On January 30, 2013 Irina Bokova announced that UNESCO will do everything possible to safeguard and rebuild Mali’s extraordinary cultural heritage, which she described as “a vital part of the country’s identity and history and fundamental for its future. Its restoration and reconstruction will give the people of Mali the strength and the confidence to rebuild national unity and look to the future. (...) Now that Timbuktu will return to normalcy, we must do everything to help the people of Mali turn a new page in the spirit of national cohesion. (...) UNESCO will spare no effort to help rebuild the mausoleums of Timbuktu and

the tomb of Askia in Gao, and we will mobilise all our expertise and resources to help safeguard and preserve the ancient manuscripts that testify to the region's glorious past as a major centre of Islamic learning. I appeal to all our partners to work with us." The Director-General also expressed her concern on the illicit export and traffic of any cultural artefact out of the country: "In times of turmoil, the risks of illicit trafficking of cultural objects are at the highest, with Mali's renowned ancient manuscripts being the most vulnerable." In 1974, UNESCO helped to set up the

Ahmed Baba research centre, where about 40,000 manuscripts are stored.

For the entire UNESCO press release of January 30, 2013 see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/resources/unescos-action-in-mali/>.

Christoph Machat

The manuscripts of Timbuktu belong to the greatest cultural treasures of Africa (photo: F1ONLINE)

