

REVIEWS

The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu and Their Race to Save the World's Most Precious Manuscripts, by Joshua Hammer, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2016, 280 pp., AUD \$47.00, ISBN 978 1 476777 40 5

Many of us recall the moment in early 2013 when our newspapers briefly covered the dispiriting news of the destruction of Timbuktu's precious holdings of ancient illuminated manuscripts¹ by the retreating troops of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (IQAM) as they relinquished control of northern Mali where they had declared a jihad against all ideas and practices that departed from their own vision of a pure Islamic society. What we couldn't know then – and which Joshua Hammer now reveals – is that the IQAM troops only succeeded in destroying a fraction of the city's fabulous manuscript holdings. As Hammer recounts, the majority of these unique and priceless works were in fact spirited out of the city's libraries and cultural institutions in an elaborate clandestine operation, stored in trunks in safe houses and ultimately carried away by brave and defiant individuals to safer towns and settlements, mainly in the south of the country. *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is primarily the story of Abdel Kader Haidara, the son of Mohammed 'Mamma' Haidara, a respected scholar and collector who not only possessed a substantial family library of manuscripts but who was among the first to work – with support of UNESCO funds – towards the collection and preservation of the region's manuscript heritage. Abdel Kader Haidara reluctantly and belatedly took up this family business, which largely involved travelling door-to-door across desert communities persuading families to surrender their private manuscript libraries to the increasingly well-endowed institutions that could provide restoration and preservation services, together with climate-controlled storage. Having worked for years to build these collections and to ensure the security of this important cultural heritage, it was Abdel Kader Haidara who then conspired with members of the local community to remove them from these highly visible central repositories in Timbuktu where they sat all too readily in the path of the IQAM troops.

The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu, however, is as much the story of Timbuktu as it is of the manuscripts and their dramatic rescue. We learn how the city grew from a collection of tents by the side of the Niger River to emerge by the late fourteenth century as a major regional centre of culture and scholasticism. The initial plans for Timbuktu's famous Djingareyber Mosque date from this time and the city first appears on a European map – in an atlas made for Charles V of France – in 1375, a testament to the city's growing significance. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are known as the Golden Age of Timbuktu and they mark the city's emergence as a renowned centre of book collecting and manuscript writing, as well as a centre for learning and the exchange of ideas. This world was first captured for European audiences in *Africa* (1550) by Leo Africanus, pen-name of Mohamed Al Wazzan Al Zayati. It is from this period that some of the most precious manuscripts date. As Hammer notes, moreover, these manuscripts contain not only fascinating explorations of diverse topics but they are illuminated works of art, such that 'Timbuktu's manuscripts were as prized for their aesthetic splendour as for their subject matter' (p. 21).

The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu is also an exploration of contemporary Timbuktu in a region of political instability and, more particularly, an account of the fate of historically liberal Muslim ideas and communities in the face of rising fundamentalist movements in North Africa. One of Hammer's key achievements in this book is the careful and detailed analysis he offers of just how it is that the fate of these priceless manuscripts became entangled in the expansion of IQAM activities across the region and what was at stake for those who sought to oppose their destruction in the wake of the violence and intolerance that marked IQAM's occupation

of Mali. As the story of a resistance movement, this one is unfailingly fascinating and moving. There is also an undeniable element of the thriller in Hammer's recounting of Abdel Kader Haidara's life as a manuscript hunter turned manuscript smuggler. While I read *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* I had to suppress the impulse to cheat and to jump ahead or to search the Internet to learn how the story turned out. When I did later search the Internet for images of the Djingareyber Mosque and of the manuscripts I couldn't help but notice how the online reviews of local sites and various local guest houses mentioned in the book all stopped abruptly at the time of the invasion, showing that while IQAM may not have been wholly successful in their destruction of culture, they had certainly succeeded in terms of the local economy.

To read *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is to experience alternating states of wonder and of shame: wonder at the cultural heritage of the region and shame at how little we in the West really know of this history and – worse – how little attention we have paid to the recent geopolitics of northwest Africa. Hammer's success in this book is his capacity to engage us just as steadily with contemporary politics and subsequent unfolding military action, as with the ideas and images of the Golden Age of Timbuktu. Our general ignorance of all of the above owes much – still – to the legacy of a colonialist imaginary in which Africa (posited as a vast undifferentiated continent) was rendered empty of history, civilisation and culture prior to the era of European imperial expansion. Even those with some familiarity with more recent archival history, culture and practices across Africa are still more likely to think in terms of colonial archives,² or the very important work that has been done interrogating the role of archives and archivists in the context of initiatives such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission³ and beyond,⁴ than of the flourishing manuscript traditions underpinning this book. There is much to learn here and a great deal of enjoyment to be had (not least from seeing the words 'bad-ass' and 'librarians' in the same title).

Notes

1. Jonathan Jones, 'Destruction of Timbuktu Manuscripts is an Offence Against the Whole of Africa', *The Guardian*, 28 January 2013, available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/28/destruction-timbuktu-manuscripts-offence-africa?INTCMP=SRCH>>, accessed 18 July 2016.
2. Liam Buckley, 'Objects of Love and Decay: Colonial Photographs in a Postcolonial Archive', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 20, no. 2, May 2005, pp. 249–70.
3. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (eds), *Refiguring the Archive*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2002.
4. See, for example, Carolyn Hamilton and Pippa Skotnes (eds), *Uncertain Curature: In and Out of the Archive*, Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2014, and Omwoyo Bosire Onyancha, Mpho Ngoepe and Jan Maluleka, 'Trends, Patterns, Challenges and Types of Archival Research in sub-Saharan Africa', *African Journal of Library, Archives & Information Science*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2015, pp. 145–59.

Maryanne Dever
 University of Technology Sydney
 maryanne.dever@uts.edu.au

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Linked Data for Libraries, Archives and Museums: How to Clean, Link and Publish Your Metadata, by Seth van Hooland and Ruben Verborgh, London, Facet, 2014, + 249 pp., GBP£49.95, ISBN 978 1 85604 964 1

The cultural heritage sector has huge amounts of metadata about their collections. Much of this sits in isolation in institutional silos. To a limited extent, institutional metadata has been made