

Contemporary librarianship and special collections issues: a case study in manuscript collections of Timbuktu and other Malian cities

Maria Luisa Russo^(a)

a) University of Hamburg, Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Germany

Contact: Maria Luisa Russo maria.luisa.russo@uni-hamburg.de.

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses the issues and challenges of special collections management through the case study of Timbuktu manuscript collections. The dual issues of preservation and access are presented in the light of current librarianship trends, highlighting the potential weaknesses of special collections libraries when faced with new missions. Given that inclusion and civil growth are part of Lyon's declaration on libraries, we should check to which extent we are able to comply with these requirements also with respect to special collections. The Malian projects provide a good point of view because of the number of activities that are currently being performed: the main activities and the way the work is organised are described, addressing at the same time the issue of access and scholarly needs. A reflection is developed on the role of special collections in the changing landscape of libraries' activities and missions.

KEYWORDS

Special collections; Librarianship; Manuscripts; Preservation; Access.

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Special collections librarianship: an old-fashioned issue?

The spread of the digital form to access content traditionally found in the book format has contributed in the past few years to making the preservation and management of rare books collections more challenging than ever. There are two questions that librarians dealing with rare, special and manuscript collections are faced with on a daily basis: how to properly preserve them for the future and how to support access for research purposes and for the wider public (see also Goodbody and Evans 2005). Supporting research means promoting the role of collections as cultural heritage and contributing to social growth in the broadest sense. Nevertheless, curators know how difficult this can be. Rare book and manuscript collections often are perceived as being too elitist, therefore distant from the immediate needs and interests of society. This often turns into initiatives that highlight only the spectacular side of the items as if they were relics.

Combining preservation requirements with research goals and promotional intents is a daily challenge for librarians and curators which requires a delicate balance. The ground for this balance – the special collection – is fragile in all senses. Libraries are increasingly embracing and trying to satisfy the needs of their users, but these needs are often in conflict with those of the collections themselves. There is also another factor to take into consideration: standards and guidelines for preservation, access and use, as well as institutional goals (such as Universities' third mission)¹ give a theoretical framework for action, but to adopt them in all situations can be difficult. These issues become even more problematic when dealing with private collections of public interest. This is the case of Malian manuscripts, that belong partly to government institutions and in large part to private families.

The fact that collections are privately owned should not be an impediment to their preservation and access when they are of public interest and when public institutions have a role in their care.

Timbuktu manuscript collections: characteristics and current situation

The manuscript collections preserved in Timbuktu are well known in the sphere of African studies and due to the events in recent years they have also become better known to the wider public. As it was at the crossroad of intellectual and commercial exchanges, Timbuktu developed an outstanding role in scholarly activity as well as in the intellectual written production since the XIV century. The commercial and intellectual circuit which encouraged the production and exchange of books involved not only Timbuktu but also other cities in West Africa, such as the historical cities in the Mauritanian area (Hall and Stewart 2011, 109-110; Stewart 2016). Collections are then derived from both local production, and scholarly and commercial exchanges. In Timbuktu, the manuscripts are preserved mainly in private families, which are their traditional provenance, and in a State institution, the Ahmed Baba Institute.

¹ Education and research are by tradition Universities' main aims. The third mission is represented by activities that facilitate the engagement of the institution with a wider public beyond the academic community. Special collections management in academic libraries must as well take this into consideration.

In 2012, when political and civil unrest took place in the city, many manuscript collections were moved to the capital Bamako. The operation was organised and coordinated by the NGO SAVAMA-DCI (Sauvegarde et Valorisation des Manuscrits pour la Défense de la Culture Islamique, henceforth SAVAMA), under the guidance of its Executive President, Abdel Kader Haïdara. The NGO represents 35 families and the estimated number of manuscripts that were moved is around 300.000: the dramatic rescue of the manuscripts has been documented and caught the interest and imagination of the worldwide press (Hammer 2016).² As for the number of items, such a huge figure could be misleading and give the impression of having to deal with Borges' Library of Babel. However, the characteristics of sub-Saharan collections can easily explain this number as it includes both texts and documents. Transmitted through generations as family heritage, Malian manuscript collections often reflect the history of the families themselves and the separation between records and books – library or archive material – is often blurred. They have served as vessels for the transmission of scholarly knowledge and also for recording family memories. The majority of the manuscripts can be dated from the XVIII century, whereas there are fewer earlier manuscripts (Hall and Stewart 2011).

Manuscripts are written in Arabic script, mostly in Arabic and often in local languages (Fulfulde, Songhai, Soninke, Bambara). They are mostly found in bundles of loose leaves, preserved inside a loose cover or simply fastened with a ribbon. The lack of a sewing structure or even of a recognisable sequence of quires blurs the concept of a codicological unit as we know it. The absence of detectable links between the text block and the cover makes it very difficult to determine whether any bookbinding structures were present and what kind. Covers wrapping several leaves could potentially have been moved from a text block to another, regardless of its origin or structure. Somehow, it is this uncertainty which makes the codicologist feel like he is dealing with Borges' Library of Babel. A manuscript can include different texts and documents, and can be composed of hundreds of leaves as well as just a few. All these aspects must be taken into consideration when dealing with such a huge amount of manuscripts (see also Triaud 2012, 204-208).

Transferred to Bamako inside metal chests and then kept in storage rooms, the manuscripts were in need of urgent preservation measures. This state of emergency rapidly attracted international attention.

At the same time, the events in Timbuktu risked casting a shadow over other important Malian collections of similar cultural relevance, such as the ones preserved in Ségou or Jenne, so more consideration was given also to the latter. As well as Timbuktu, these cities have been important cultural centres, playing an outstanding role in the intellectual exchange in Mali over the past centuries, and housed several important manuscript collections. Even if not directly involved or damaged by the military insurrection, these collections were also in need of protection.

Funds were made available by international institutions to contribute to a course of action to safeguard the collections and to support the process of transforming them into accessible libraries. The main activities were:

² See Hammer (2016); documentary videos, both professional and amateur, are available on the web.

- Inventory making;
- Urgent preventive conservation measures (dry cleaning, boxing);
- Digitisation;
- Re-furbishing/reconstruction of the library buildings in Timbuktu;
- Improving access and fostering research.

Several international institutions have contributed to these activities in the last few years and many still support them.³ The author of this article writes as co-manager of the projects financed by German institutions, and will focus on the characteristics and structure of these projects. Three main institutions gave their financial support: the German Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt), the Gerda Henkel Foundation and the Jutta Vogel Foundation.⁴ The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures of the University of Hamburg (henceforth: CSMC) has undertaken the coordination and technical partnership for the different projects in this area, under the direction of Dmitry Bondarev.⁵ Currently (September 2016), inventorying and box-making are also being supported by UNESCO and the Ford Foundation. The digitization of the manuscripts is being run by SAVAMA with the technical and financial support of Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Saint John's University.⁶

Whereas German institutions have provided funding, equipment and/or training, the leading role in all the proceedings is played by the local people. This has been done in an effort to guarantee the sustainability of the project in the longer term and to promote the empowerment of local personnel and partner organisations.

In Timbuktu and Ségou the partner institution is SAVAMA, where almost 70 Malians are employed to take care of preservation, inventorying and digitisation. Also in Jenne all activities concerning the manuscripts involve local people; here the partner institution is the Manuscript Library of Jenne that preserves the manuscripts of some of the families of the city.

A third project, exclusively devoted to research, does not envisage a specific institutional partnership, but is instead based on the free-lance activity of Malian researchers. The project focuses on manuscripts in Arabic script in local languages (Ajami manuscripts), and research is conducted on several collections throughout Mali, involving both scholars and families.⁷

3 In alphabetical order: Auswärtiges Amt (Federal Foreign Office), British Library (Endangered Archives Programme), Direction du Développement et de la Coopération (Swiss Confederation), Ford Foundation, Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Jutta Vogel Stiftung, LuxDev (Luxembourg Agency for Development Cooperation), Juma Al-Majid Center for Culture and Heritage (Dubai), MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), Prince Claus Foundation, UNESCO.

4 German Federal Foreign Office website <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de>; Gerda Henkel Stiftung website <https://www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de>; Jutta Vogel Stiftung website <http://jutta-vogel-stiftung.de>. Timbuktu Project website http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/timbuktu/index_e.html.

5 CSMC website <http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de>. See also Bondarev et al. 2014; Russo and Bondarev 2015.

6 HMML website <http://www.hmml.org>.

7 *African voices in Islamic manuscripts from Mali: a Study of African languages written in Arabic-based script*. Project website http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/ajami/index_e.html.

The manuscripts at the centre: activities performed on collections

As a result of both the state of emergency and time constraints, the on-going projects are focussing primarily on the manuscripts and on the efforts to safeguard them. The manuscripts were moved from Timbuktu to Bamako, with special attention given to maintaining their order, and each collection was accompanied by a rough list of the items it contained. However, as the operation was rushed, it was clear that a more comprehensive list of manuscripts would be required as soon as possible. These lists are currently being compiled on spreadsheets, both in Arabic and in French, for each library. They include essential data for each manuscript: serial number, author, title, subject, number of leaves, physical conditions. The workflow of the inventory making is organized into steps. Five to six people, Arabists, identify the essential data required for each manuscript; the data are then entered into the spreadsheet. The inventory undergoes a content revision and it is then translated into French. Data identification and data entry therefore remain separate, given also the issues of writing in Arabic on electronic devices.⁸ Given all these aspects, this approach has proved to be the best possible, especially if one considers the three constraints which projects usually have to deal with: scope, cost and time, while keeping quality paramount.⁹ At the same time, what we call the “skills aggregation” has proved so far to be effective.

In the Jenne project, on the other hand, a more stable situation and a reduced number of manuscripts have allowed planning for catalogues on the style of the *Series Catalogorum* published by CNRS-Mondes Iranien et Indien (Nobili 2013).

As far as preservation measures are concerned, the problematic situation of the manuscripts, originally kept in a very different climate compared to the one in Timbuktu, has already been described in other contributions (Russo and Bondarev 2015). Stacks of metal chests gathered inside storage rooms posed a real threat to collections, exposing them to high temperatures and humidity and, as a consequence, to the risk of mould growth and insect attack.

A preservation laboratory was set up, where preliminary and necessary measures on manuscripts – such as dry cleaning, folder making and box making – could be carried out. At the same time, attention focussed on the storage rooms: USB data loggers were installed in each room in order to monitor micro-climate conditions and data is periodically downloaded, processed and stored.

Humidity and temperature recorders have been present in the storage rooms since 2014: they provided punctual measurements that could be checked on-site, however it should be noted that this data was not recorded. Therefore, it was not possible to check and evaluate environmental changes on a longer time span. The current equipment provides more relevant data to understand the overall situation and to plan for solutions.¹⁰

⁸ Namely, the problem of a right-to-left script and of the different shapes of letters in isolated or linked position (initial, medial or final) inside words.

⁹ The quality level is the best possible given the context of the specific situation: a more in-depth cataloguing would not be possible due to the number of items, as it would require more time and higher costs. As far as boxing is concerned, the choice of the type of box was based on an evaluation which sought a balance between the aim of the project (providing boxes for all manuscripts) and the preference expressed by the owner families.

¹⁰ For an interesting study on indoor climatic history see Eibl and Brumester 2013.

As we know, standards for the preservation of cultural heritage recommend rather strict temperature and relative humidity ranges. Nevertheless, the recent (and not so recent) debate about standards has highlighted the importance of allowing flexibility when considering specific situations to avoid excessive strains to the artefacts – due to being previously stored in a different climate – and for sustainability reasons (Padfield 1986; Mecklenburg 2007). The elements which emerge from data collection need to be taken into consideration in their entirety to avoid undertaking unilateral measures that would solve only one problem, leaving others unsolved or even creating new ones.¹¹ The strict application of climatic standards for the preservation of paper artefacts as far as temperature is concerned¹² would require the use of air conditioning systems that would not be a viable solution for the institutions involved, at least not on a long term basis. In terms of sustainability, this would be very risky: even though these costs were to be met with external funding, they would likely be the first to be cut in case of a budget review. Consequently, with the manuscript collections in Timbuktu we are relying mainly on passive climate control, exploiting rooms that are more protected against external temperature fluctuations. At the same time, dehumidifiers are being used mostly during the rainy season – since in other periods humidity is very low.

The boxes that are currently being made are drop spine boxes covered in cloth; several manuscripts can be housed inside a box, each one inside a paper folder. The manufacture of this kind of boxes is more complex compared to boxes made of corrugated board, like the ones that are increasingly being used in Western collections. The tendency to create a sealed environment, which is not a desirable characteristic in enclosures, is nevertheless showing some effects in terms of mitigating the environmental fluctuations¹³: these effects are currently under evaluation through data study.

The envelopes that are being used to store each manuscript are made from grey paper, compliant with standard ISO 6588-1:2005 and in two different weights; the paper bands that were initially used to wrap the manuscripts have been replaced by a paper compliant with standard ISO 9706:1994. Finally, attention is being given to other marginal preservation activities, such as the numbering of leaves.

Numbering has to be undertaken to prevent misplacing the unbound leaves and in order to prepare for digitisation. To do this, people at first have used locally sourced office pencils and erasers.

11 Often, adopting drastic measures to solve specific problems in the field of environmental monitoring can prove to be less than ideal as far as other aspects of preservation are concerned.

12 Maximum 18°C according to standard ISO 11799:2015, slightly higher (20°C) in IFLA guidelines (always with a tolerated fluctuation rate). In national publications slightly greater flexibility is envisaged, but the recommended temperature is usually not higher than 22°C (see also Bertini 2005, 81-88).

13 Although this article does not deal with addressing the issue of the type of box chosen, it is worth mentioning that it was introduced and then kept throughout the project after discussing technical issues and aesthetic concerns with the families of the owners. Scepticism over boxes made with corrugated board arose from several reasons, not least the fact that during the first phase of rescuing the collections large quantities of machine-made boxes, made with this cardboard, had been provided by different donors. These boxes were indeed not suitable, as they were of standard sizes which were too large for the documents that would then move about in the closed box. Subsequently, other boxes were made out of corrugated board, custom made to fit the manuscripts and reproducing the shape of manuscripts covers. They were non-adhesive but revealed to be not entirely suitable for other reasons of technical nature (a long ribbon and a knot on the upper side posed some shelving problems). Afterwards a third type of box, drop-spine, custom made and without ribbons, was proposed and it is what is currently being used in Jenne library. SAVAMA collections are being stored in boxes covered with cloth, financed also by UNESCO and Ford Foundation.

However, some doubts were raised about the unclear composition of these materials and the possible residues they could leave onto the manuscripts. On the basis of the technical specifications issued by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage in the Capitolato Speciale Tecnico (De Bella et al. 2005, 6), one of the few preservation guidelines available on this matter, suitable pencils and erasers were provided.

The difficulty of supplying these specific materials in Mali can be easily imagined. Most of them come from Europe, with additional problems due to shipping times and costs. Nevertheless, the role of CSMC as technical partner is especially effective in this respect, as they also provide support in purchasing all the supplies needed.

Also for activities such as leaves numbering, the staff employed are entirely local. This aspect must not be underestimated; the importance of the role played by both the project and the cultural institutions within the local social context is testified by the positive results achieved and the ability of the institution – in this case SAVAMA – to attract new human resources.

Finally, in order to provide renovated and well-equipped spaces to accommodate the returned collections into the city, the refurbishment of the library buildings in the Timbuktu region is also being undertaken. The renovation is being carried out by SAVAMA in compliance with the UNESCO standards for the protection of the historical city of Timbuktu. As for the digitization of the manuscripts, it is currently being run by SAVAMA with the technical and financial support of Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. A close collaboration has also been established with CSMC on combined training initiatives.

Access, research and development as strategic goals: the role of special collections

In the last few decades, Timbuktu collections have been studied and researched thanks to international catalogues and projects that have stressed their importance (Hunwick 2003, Jeppie 2015).¹⁴ However, after they have been moved to Bamako, the situation has evolved into a state of emergency and access to the collections can be allowed only after inventorying and basic preservation measures. When referring to project management, this can be seen a series of finish-to-start steps: the second activity (access and research) can start only after the first activity (basic preservation measures) has been accomplished. Nevertheless, the need to access these collections for research purposes is increasing and the solutions that are currently being put in place aim to allow access even though the work is still on-going.

While the project funded by the German Federal Foreign Office address preservation, inventory making and libraries renovation, two other projects, funded by Gerda Henkel Foundation, involve research. In the first one, focused on Timbuktu manuscripts, research on specific topics is being run on collections preserved within SAVAMA. The second project has been developed on Ajami manuscripts – manuscripts in local languages written in Arabic script – which cover a wider

14 See also Tombouctou Manuscripts Project website <http://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org>.

geographical area. Research is carried out by Malian researchers, whose main aims are to identify local languages and to catalogue Ajami manuscripts preserved in different collections.¹⁵

Organizing access solutions in a new-born library, where many of the activities described above are still on-going, and where collections are stored in different places is a challenge, and logistic issues risk impeding access. However, efforts have been made in this respect and, after consulting the inventory lists, researchers are now able to request manuscripts with one or two days' notice. Much work still needs to be done, and the lack of proper access facilities, such as a reading room equipped with computers and catalogues, is an issue that will have to be addressed. At present, access takes place in an available room inside the building; opening hours for researchers are linked to staff availability on a personal basis and therefore can vary quite considerably. These issues are also due to the fact that in ONG SAVAMA there is currently no librarian/curator position. Hopefully this problem will be resolved as soon as the state of emergency is overtaken and a long term day-to-day collection management plan is put in place.

David Lankes would suggest that the activities described are actually focusing on collection management rather than on the needs of the local communities. In his view, in fact, the librarian interacts with the community, serving as a social actor to foster improvement and change in society (Lankes 2011a, 2011b). The situation described above is perhaps more reminiscent of Musil's library, managed by a passive keeper of books, locked inside the library to protect and care for the heritage.¹⁶ In 2014 the Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development has stressed the importance of access to information as an element for development.¹⁷ It is important to deepen the understanding of this subject with regards to special collections, to prevent institutions from becoming ivory towers of knowledge, devoted only to safekeeping treasures and with no tangible influence on the cultural growth and social participation with knowledge. Digitisation projects and divulgation initiatives risk solving only one side of the problem; the way images are made available creates a divide between a research-oriented access and a superficial fruition. Recent contributions about the social role of digital libraries (Capaccioni 2015) add useful elements to considerations that have their origins in modern library studies and that can be adapted to special collections.

Returning to the problem we posed at the beginning of this article: is there a risk that special, rare and manuscript collections could be considered as relics, as spectacular items with little or no effect on real life? Such use of cultural heritage would be only superficial and would not contribute to any social change. Manuscripts are among the most precious and rare objects and we cannot expect them to foster social change in a way that is immediately tangible: modern libraries are of course closer to communities' life and needs, and the way they are experienced is more immediate (Musoke and Namugera 2014). This is true both in European and in African collections. In order to have a more tangible impact on society, research on special collections has to be developed and kept alive. Researchers, seen as users as well as mediators, can contribute significantly to bringing collections

¹⁵ See footnote no. 7.

¹⁶ The librarian in Musil's *The man without qualities*, chapter 100: "General Stumm invades the State Library and learns about the world of books, the librarians guarding it, and intellectual order" (Musil 1995, 500-506).

¹⁷ Lyon declaration, <http://www.lyondeclaration.org>. Although already announced, a response by the Rare Books and Special Collection Section of IFLA has not been released yet.

closer to communities. Different projects are showing their potential in this field, promoting collaboration not only between academic and non-academic communities, and institutions, but also between exponents of different communities.¹⁸ The attempt to create links between special collections and the school system also opens new perspectives in different areas. As an example, in Europe important projects on music collections include research on an academic and curatorial level, but also focus on creating a link with education. Through events, seminars and workshops, students in music schools are directly involved with the collections which become part of their learning experience.¹⁹

With the librarians-curators becoming closer to the ideal of “facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities, with an emphasis on service, identifying user needs and communicating solutions” (Krolak 2005, 7), special collections become closer to civil society, having a positive impact on cultural participation.²⁰

As may be expected, each situation has its own constraints and the unique characteristics of the Malian context must always be taken into consideration. Mainly dealing with privately owned collections, the concept of free access to collections – i.e. information knowledge in the wider sense, that we naturally consider as a given in our public institutions – is not entirely applicable in projects such as the Ajami project. The social interactions that lie behind are more complex and challenging. Being able to access collections that are kept in private households depends largely on the ability to establish good relations with the families themselves; the role of local people to act as mediators is therefore crucial, and this task is being accomplished by the local researchers currently employed on the project.

Another prominent topic of discussion in the current debate about the role of libraries is the way in which the buildings hosting them are used and organised. In contemporary librarianship trends, the user (no longer called “user” but “member”) should be at the centre with the books all around them, not only metaphorically. Instead, in the collections from Timbuktu, the artefact is at the centre and dominates almost all the rooms, where the measures on the items are carried out. As a consequence, space for reading and research is reduced as well as opening times. Of course, this is a challenge that will need to be addressed as soon as possible to see this library change from a building dedicated to various practical activities, to a place where knowledge is accessed and shared.

If we want our modern collections libraries to represent a place for accessing and sharing knowledge, special collections deserve the same treatment. When talking about universities’ “third mission”, we are specifically dealing with this issue: together with educational and research purposes, knowledge institutions have to contribute to social inclusion, and development.

18 This is the case of the above-mentioned Ajami project.

19 See for example the CeDoMus project developed in Regione Toscana: CeDoMus project website <http://www.cedomus.toscana.it>.

20 A conference held in Rome in 2014 addressed the matter from many different perspectives: “Il riuso dei contenuti culturali digitali per l’istruzione, il turismo e il tempo libero: un’opportunità per le istituzioni culturali e le industrie creative, un investimento per il futuro”. Roma, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, 2 October 2014. Some of the presentations are available at the conference website <http://www.athenaplus.eu/romeconference>.

Of course, the path is somehow longer for special collections than for modern collections. To reach out to civil society, special collections need to be mediated twice: through the work of scholars and researchers and through that of the librarian. This requires collection management to provide the users with adequate and user-friendly access tools, to create new ways for access, along with educational and promotional opportunities for a newer and larger audience.

Museums and cultural institutions increasingly target school-age audiences with workshops and educational events aimed at developing an interest in their cultural heritage. This approach creates a larger user group and, by creating awareness, fosters a good relationship between the younger audience and the cultural heritage. With all the necessary care, this approach will also have to be undertaken in relation to special collections to prevent them remaining isolated, underused treasures.

Many institutions, mainly the smaller ones, often forced by limited funding to make drastic choices, still deal with the dilemma of the balance between the functions (activities on collections) and the purposes (preservation, access, research). However, even when dealing with limited funding it is important that cultural institutions take care to avoid their function overshadowing what their real aims are, otherwise, if on the one hand we may have succeeded in avoiding the nightmare that would be the Borges' library, we will, on the other, have our libraries filled with Musil's librarians.

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