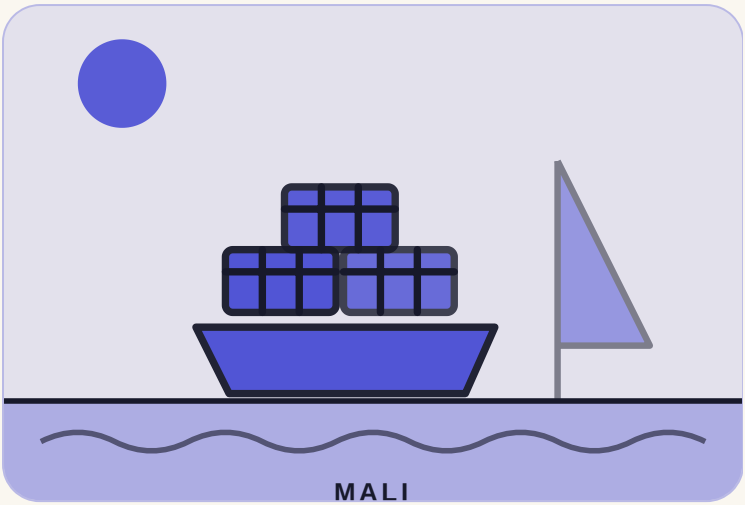

MALI

The librarian who smuggled Timbuktu's books

When jihadists took Timbuktu, a librarian and his helpers moved hundreds of thousands of ancient manuscripts to safety.

WHERE	Timbuktu
WHO	Abdel Kader Haidara, a Malian librarian, his nephew Mohammed Touré and a team of volunteers
WHEN	2012 to 2014

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Timbuktu, in Mali, was once a famous centre of learning. For centuries, families there kept hand-written books on astronomy, poetry, law, history and medicine. In 2012, those books were in danger.

That spring, rebels linked to al-Qaeda took control of the city. They later smashed the tombs of Muslim saints. Abdel Kader Haidara, a librarian, was sure they would come for the books next.

Haidara came from a family of scholars. When he was 17, his father died, and he took up his work of collecting manuscripts. Years later, a delegation sent by Libya's leader offered to buy his whole library. He refused. It was the heritage of Mali, he said.

> **No, this is my library.**
>
> MOHAMMED TOURÉ, HAIDARA'S NEPHEW, TO A JIHADIST WHO SAID HE WAS STEALING BOOKS

Night after night

So Haidara and his nephew, Mohammed Touré, began to hide the books. They bought metal trunks in the markets until there were no more. Behind locked doors, volunteers packed the books by flashlight. By July 2012, the books were in safe houses around Timbuktu.

Then they had to reach Bamako, the capital, more than 400 miles away. From September, couriers drove trunks south in rented 4x4s, past checkpoints. When the roads closed, boats carried the books down the Niger River.

350,000
manuscripts moved, by one count

45
libraries emptied

95%
or more of Timbuktu's manuscripts saved, by two sources

It was dangerous. Jihadists arrested Touré one night and held him for 24 hours, until Haidara found people to speak up for him. After a later trip, he was jailed in Bamako too. Donors gave about $1 million for the rescue.

What was lost, and what waits

In January 2013, militants fled the city. As they left, they burned about 4,200 manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Institute, a state library. By February, nearly all the books from the 45 private libraries were safe.

In 2014, Haidara said he could not yet take the books home, because the north was unsafe. A University of Hamburg page, updated in 2020, says the books were still in chests around Bamako. It says the damp climate is a new danger.

How it unfolded

- **1981** Haidara's father dies. At 17, Abdel Kader takes up his work.
- **2012** Rebels take Timbuktu in April. Haidara's team begins hiding the books.
- **2013** By February, nearly all the books have left Timbuktu. About 4,200 burn at the Ahmed Baba Institute.
- **2014** Haidara says he cannot yet bring the books home.
- **2020** A University of Hamburg page says the books are still in chests near Bamako.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Haidara did not own all these books. Families had trusted him with them, and he treated that trust as a duty.

The rescue was not perfect. Some books burned, and the saved ones were still away from home when these sources were written.

OUR TAKE

A treasure is safest when many ordinary people are willing to carry it.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Know what you hold

Haidara understood that the books were part of Africa's written history.

Try this: Learn what matters most in your care, and protect it first.

2 Act before the worst

The team bought trunks and hid the books while the main danger was still coming.

Try this: Prepare for a danger while you still have time.

3 Share the work

Haidara, his nephew, volunteers, couriers and donors each did a part.

Try this: Ask for help. Big tasks need many hands.

4 Keep a second plan

When the roads closed, boats carried the books down the river.

Try this: Have another way ready when the first one fails.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A library can be saved by the people who care about it.

Sources

National Geographic
The Brave Sage of Timbuktu: Abdel Kader Haidara (Joshua Hammer, 2014)

Mail & Guardian
Scroll smugglers: How Timbuktu's secret treasures were saved (2014)

University of Hamburg
Timbuktu manuscripts (page last updated 22 June 2020)

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on numbers. How many manuscripts: National Geographic says 350,000 from 45 libraries; the Mail & Guardian says the librarians told it almost 400,000; the University of Hamburg says about 2,400 chests (and a count of about 285,000 individual items in one stage of the work) and says the manuscripts were held in over 35 private libraries plus the state Ahmed Baba Institute; the story uses 350,000 and says by one count. How many were saved: Mail & Guardian says more than 95 percent and Hamburg says at least 95 percent; the story says 95 percent or more. How many burned: National Geographic says 4,200 were burned at the Ahmed Baba Institute minutes before militants fled; a Mail & Guardian caption says about 4,000 were burned; the story uses National Geographic's 4,200 and says about. Timeline of the rescue: National Geographic describes nine months ending in February 2013; Hamburg says eight months from June 2012 to January 2013; the story gives the dates it can attribute: rebels took Timbuktu on 1 April 2012 (Hamburg), trunks were bought about a month into the takeover and all books were in safe houses by July (National Geographic), long-distance transport started in September and boats were used when AQIM closed the roads (National Geographic). Distance: National Geographic says more than 400 miles to Bamako; Hamburg says more than 700 kilometres. Haidara's history (his father's death in 1981 when he was 17, the Libyan offer in 1996 and his refusal) is from National Geographic. The quote and the night arrest of Touré, the 24 hours in custody, the later jail in Bamako and the $1 million raised by his American partner Stephanie Diakité and donors in Europe, the United States and the Middle East are from National Geographic; the Mail & Guardian confirms the lockers, the 4x4s, the checkpoints and the Bamako base. That Haidara was sure the militants would target the books is from National Geographic; Hamburg says destruction of manuscripts became a rebel priority. The 2014 remark about being unable to take the books home is from National Geographic; the 2020 statement about the chests, the damp climate and the danger it poses is from Hamburg. We do not know what has happened to the

books since 2020. The Smithsonian page could not be opened (403); NPR and the Pulitzer Center were not relied on. All three sources describe the rescue from the librarians' own accounts. The pin shows Timbuktu. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.