

Preserving the history at the heart of an age-old crisis

Tuaregs have taken over Timbuktu but precious cultural items are intact

Shamil Jeppie

THE HISTORIC town of Timbuktu fell into the hands of two separate groups of rebels in the first week of April, sowing confusion among inhabitants.

One group took over the small airport, another the barracks. They pillaged some buildings, including the offices of the famous Ahmad Baba Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Research library, though they did not enter the new building funded by the South African Initiative on Mali.

Vehicles used by the library were taken, but as far as can be ascertained none of the heritage sites was damaged, nor were manuscript collections looted.

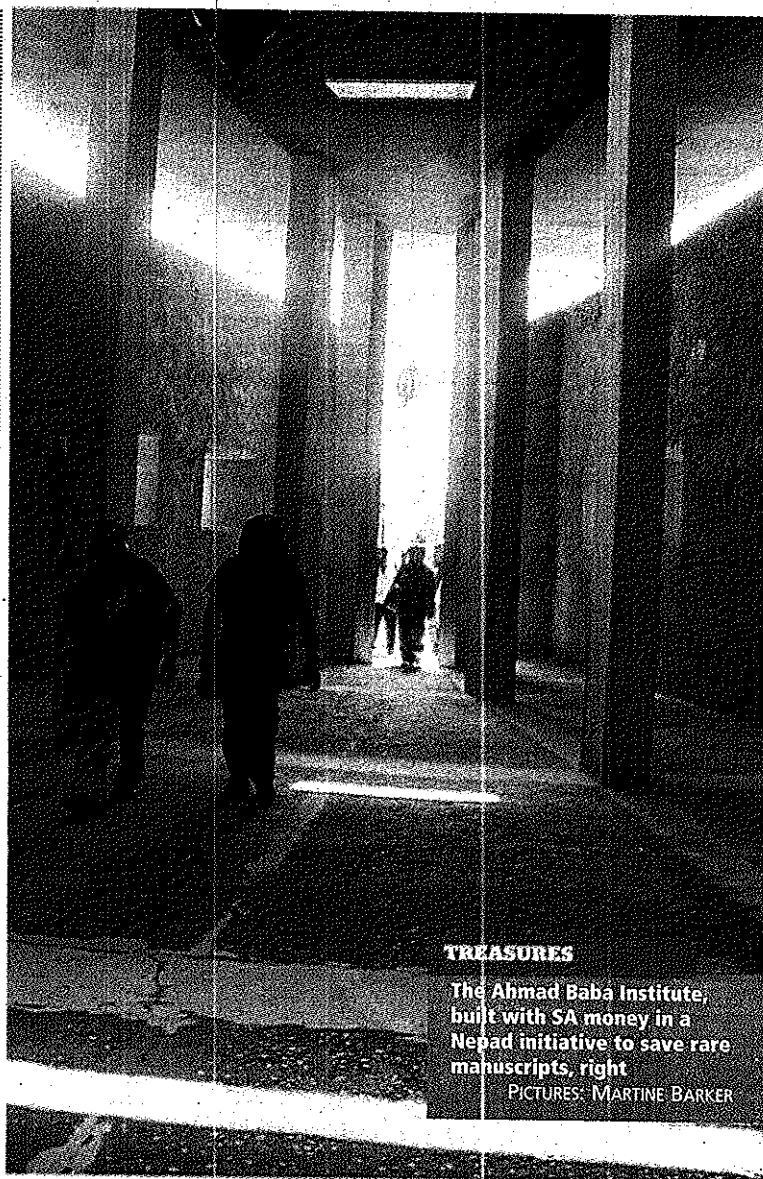
Residents live in fear, however, and there's little doubt the already tenuous local economy will suffer heavily.

Tourists, for instance, will not venture to visit for a while. Hotels will close, which means fewer jobs.

Guides will have no work, people working on the farming projects on the outskirts will fear going to their fields, and river and bush transport will be infrequent – which will mean short supplies of essentials. Timbuktu's isolation will again become a major factor in its existence.

Since January, with talk of Tuareg fighters moving southwards, those who could, left for the capital Bamako.

Rumours spread after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya last year that the Tuareg he had cultivated were fleeing to Niger and would soon enter Mali.



TREASURES

The Ahmad Baba Institute, built with SA money in a Nepad initiative to save rare manuscripts, right

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In the 1990s a major rebellion by the Tuareg seriously tested Mali's armed forces, which did not inspire confidence.

Though a 1996 a peace agree-

ment brought that civil strife to an end – foreign aid was used to pay rebels for every weapon given to the state, and Timbuktu was the site for the burning of weapons and



their incorporation into a peace monument – Tuareg grievances run deep.

They have complained since independence of being excluded from power and access to resources.

Some of their statements even praise the French colonisers of the Sahara for giving them more autonomy.

The French, of course, also exploited differences between the lighter-skinned Tuareg and the rest of the population of the "Soudan Français" – French Soudan, as the territory that became Mali was called.

The current rebels therefore have a longer dispute with the rulers of Mali – as old as the independent state itself.

In Timbuktu – and the other towns taken by the Tuareg, Kidal and Gao – some may use the term "Tuareg" when asked about their identity. However, Tuareg is a term of recent invention and the term

Kel Tamasheq (speakers of the Tamasheq language) is the more correct name.

But many would have complex identities not easily reducible to Tuareg or Kel Tamasheq. Inter-marriage and various forms of bondage in the past have created a complex society not easily separable into distinct ethnic groups.

Yet people who clearly are not Kel Tamasheq want to leave Timbuktu and those who can have left.

Timbuktu is a Unesco World Heritage site and the town and its surrounding settlements have at least two dozen libraries holding manuscript collections of varying sizes.

Among the manuscripts are materials that treat the history of the conflicts we are now witnessing again.

History is at the heart of the crisis.

It is for this reason that there is much sensitivity about the materials. They record hundreds of years of contention over wells, hamlets, mines, inheritance, and complicated family lineages.

For this reason, too, the manuscripts may either be treated respectfully by rebels and soldiers, or be seen as dangerous or precious and be carried away or burned.

So far it is the former.

With internal consensus through the assistance of its neighbours and the African Union, Mali may be able to set its house in order in the coming weeks, and the business of caring for the country's rich written heritage can slowly gather pace again.

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