



2010 AFRICAN MANUSCRIPTS CONFERENCE



AID TRANSPARENCY (DAKAR, SENEGAL) / SAVAMA-DCI (TIMBUKTU, MALI)

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE **PRESERVING ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS IN AFRICA**

Addis Ababa, 17-19 December 2010

THEMATIC AREAS

I. CONSERVATION

Panel 1: Collections Radioscopy and Preservation Challenges (field exploration; cataloguing; conservation; restoration; digitization)

This session will describe ancient manuscripts collections in different parts of the African continent, particularly in West Africa where they are concentrated in large numbers, and in several parts of Europe and North America. Obviously, manuscripts whether written on papyrus, imported paper, parchment, and various types of animal skins including fish in different alphabets abound in virtually all sub-regions of Africa if one includes prehistoric rock drawings from South Africa to Algeria. Attention should also be paid to indigenous languages wrapped in Arabic scriptures and labeled “ajami” (non Arabic) as well as writing systems designed by Africans themselves throughout the ages (early manifestations of the separation between messages and their senders through rocks, cave paintings and abstract if not religious symbols found from North to South); and more recent writing systems noted in Cameroun under NDioya’s sultanate, in the Mende, Bambara, Fulfulbe cultural areas, the Gulf of Guinea with the Vai alphabet in Liberia and in Central and West Africa where Nsibidi written records flourished at some point in time, not to mention the brilliant ancient Nile Valley civilizations (Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan) where humankind witnessed the production of hieroglyphics and other types of early scriptures during 4500 years of uninterrupted scientific and intellectual hegemony.

All these ancient records of mankind’s intellectual adventure are more or less well preserved in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Ethiopia whereas they are endangered if not severely damaged by adverse natural and entropic factors in Timbuktu, a major crossing point between Maghreb, the Sahara and the Niger Valley civilizations as well as the Sahrawi cultural enclave, Mauritania, the Senegalese *finistere*, the Sudanese hinterland and neighboring Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), the Guinea highlands and the Futa Jallon’s flourishing plateaux, the Gulf of Guinea and Gold Coast kingdoms and the Hausa, Dyula, Fang, Yoruba cultural areas. In Central Africa, records have almost vanished and were destroyed either by European evangelists and militia or internal wars. In East Africa, more particularly in Kenya’s costal area and in Tanzania, written treasures are fast disappearing

leaving a trail of looted and severely damaged manuscripts, particularly between Mombassa and Lamu.

International institutions such as the Unesco, IFLA and universities as well as Christian and Islamic religious centers have played a pivotal role in preserving Africa's ancient manuscripts. Although important these bold initiatives represent a drop in the ocean. The chaotic situation regarding Africa's ancient records is compounded by the regrettable break between institutions of higher learning and autochthonous cultural centers and village settings.

For all these reasons, time has come to emphasize the urgent necessity to describe Africa's records, explore "new" ancient manuscripts sites, restore the damaged fragile paper and ink based manuscripts, digitize some of the most valuable pieces without further endangering them and analyze the breadth and depth of historical facts lying beneath these written patrimonies and priceless other immaterial cultural manifestations.

Panelists will be expected to present cutting edge, ground breaking discoveries and insights so that African historiography's outstanding methodological and chronological challenges can be overcome with a degree of scientific wisdom that may only be reached through long term dedication to apprenticeship, research and access to relevant knowledge management, processing and storing technologies and processes.

The selection of new material will be encouraged in the following areas: presentation of innovative preservation (conservation and cataloguing) models and strategies; analysis of threats and promises associated with the digitization of ancient manuscripts; legal challenges related to copy and intellectual property rights in the African context.

In this era of globalized knowledge industries and increasing interfacing of all available media and their content, Africa cannot ignore the frontal debate on the evolution and future of mankind's primary archival records and modern scientific achievements. Should Africa "leapfrog" through the different steps that led national and global cultural settings to unprecedented levels of discoveries at a pace that defies imagination? How can the keepers of Africa's written treasures and patrimony be assisted so that they can successfully face the challenges of preservation, cataloguing, digitization, restoration and codification while generating resources that can contribute to their well being? How can the nightmarish separation between African universities and cultural sites be restored, thus, enabling scholars to play their partition despite increasing threats linked to the negative impact of ill-conceived educational and cultural policies? These are some of the questions that this session will tackle through creative presentations and discussions.

Panel 2: Conservation Protocols, Learning Tools and Local Responses to Conservation Challenges and Intellectual Property Rights

This session will review existing literature on conservation protocols, learning tools and local attempts to solve daunting problems related to processing, organizing, disseminating, and stocking vital information left unchecked or insufficiently observed for centuries. Existing protocols in Africa and elsewhere will be reviewed in view of identifying loopholes and adverse factors that can further downgrade existing informal systems whether in institutional or non-institutional surroundings and mechanisms.

Panelists will have a fresh look at conservation/restoration strategies and *modus operandi*. The following research questions will be dealt with: How to diagnose ancient manuscripts collections? What techniques, technologies and specialized manpower should best fit in the ravaged socio-environment so prevalent in most African countries forcing decision-takers to choose between providing bread and shelter and literally taking away food from the mouth of youth and old people to invest in crumbling written heritage treasures? How to rank-order interventions and, above all, how and where to train a sizeable full-time and part-time workforce able to spend time on Africa's endangered written treasures whilst committing themselves to the tallest ideals of responsible social mobilization and accountability? How to face the challenge of neutralizing black market forces and the devastation created by generalized corruption and poverty surrounding the ancient manuscripts marketplace in Africa?

Another no less important agenda is the complex monitoring and enforcement of intellectual property rights associated with the management and ownership of Africa's primary sources of its cultural heritage. Legal frameworks at national, sub-regional and regional levels are missing most of the time. Lawyers and magistrate are often ill informed if not totally ignorant of the complexities of rights linked to intellectual property and the protection, ownership, sale and circulation of ancient manuscripts. The African market for rare books and ancient manuscripts is itself in an embryonic stage and can seldom rely on an array of multifaceted and indispensable expertise (*commissaries-priseurs*, notaries, specialized libraries, digital portals and critiques, all scrutinizing all aspects of manuscripts appearance and evolutionary context, etc).

II. RESEARCH

Panel 3: Ancient Manuscripts Transliteration and Content Analysis

Ancient West African Arabic manuscripts, Nile Valley hieroglyphics written on papyrus treaties and wall tombs, Ethiopia's parchments couched in Geerz, Mauritania and Western Sahara's Sahrawi writing style or the so-called Sudanese Arabic writing style typical of the Niger bend area, all point to the difficulty linked with deciphering Africa's ancient memoirs. Most intellectuals trained in westernized universities have usually no knowledge of Arabic as a scientific medium or are trapped between "Anglophone" and "Francophone" futile rivalries and are sometimes separated by different traditions of learning and reasoning which in turn tend to widen the gap between Africophones unfortunately not trained to use the languages and writing systems of their ancestors for scientific purposes. The break between "African studies" or History Departments and the massive and urgent need for translating ancient manuscripts still very insufficiently explored, transliterated and analyzed from a discursive, aesthetic and paradigmatic standpoints are compelling evidence that there is a need for urgent and transcendent action.

Authors are encouraged to place emphasis on: a/ New historical facts based on ancient manuscripts whether in the areas of astronomy, slavery systems, local chronicles or charters, etc; b/ Transliteration of important ancient texts in African (including "Ajami") and Arabic languages; c/ Comparative assessment of ancient texts in different parts of Africa; d/ Covering uncharted territories (women's intellectual involvement; African Diaspora's ancient manuscripts or literature related to African cultural heritage; etc); e/ Analysis of ancient manuscripts (whether kept in Africa or other parts of the world) that can shed new light on particular historical facts.

III. Sustainable Financial Capacity Building

Panel 4: Ancient Manuscripts in Africa: A Blind Spot in International Grant Making

International grant makers and African decision takers and private sector members and philanthropists will be invited to brainstorm on how best to serve African public and private librarians and keepers of ancient manuscripts in the face of increasing financial and infrastructural challenges in Africa.

In addition, the following issues will be discussed: a/ Presentation of a Feasibility Study on Setting Up a West African Training Centre for Manuscripts Preservation; b/ Integrating the Content of Ancient Manuscripts in Existing Curricula; c/ Capacity building in transliterating ancient manuscripts: operational models; d/ A Strategic Framework for Sustainable Financial Support For Ancient Manuscripts Preservation; e/ International Partnership and the African Archival Crisis: A Road Map for Coherence, Innovation and Dialogue; f/ Museums: A Case for Renewed Partnership With Libraries; g/ Empowering Small Libraries: A Key to Sustainable Preservation; h/ Private Sector Involvement: Which Way Forward?

Plenary Sessions (Day 3)

Rapporteurs will present conclusions of their respective panels the following day. New amendments will be discussed and accepted. Participants will agree on final recommendations and a road map towards sustainable income generating systems for preserving ancient manuscripts in Africa. Mechanisms will also be set in motion in view of increasing information exchange between stakeholders and joint cooperation at sub-regional, regional and international levels.

Keynote addresses

Eminent speakers and issues to be dealt with will be determined through consultations with High Level Contact Group members and Scientific Steering Committee members.