



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Case study: Cultural heritage as a vehicle for peace in Timbuktu

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by Joana Dabaj

The fabled 'city of 333 Saints', Timbuktu, is located in the republic of Mali at the edge of the Sahara desert and near the Niger River. Founded in the 5th century, it was long regarded as a centre for the diffusion of Islam through West Africa and a city of trade, where manuscripts and books were sold for more money than merchandise. By 1988, when Timbuktu was designated as a World Heritage Site for its holy places and their essential role in the spread of Islam in Africa, much of the ancient city still stood as a testament to the city's golden age. Though many of its monuments were in urgent need of conservation, its mosques, mausoleums and holy places nevertheless offered clear proof of the city's rich history.

Having survived for centuries, however, Timbuktu received a devastating blow in 2012 when it fell under the control of Ansar Dine, an extremist group who at that time controlled most of northern Mali. Militants set about destroying the city's mosque, mausoleums, shrines and holy statues in a move described by the ICC as a war crime. It represented an assault on everything that Timbuktu represented, including the values of cultural exchange and peaceful cohabitation. Irreplaceable manuscripts, covering geography, history and religion, were burned and music forbidden, in a country renowned for its rich musical traditions.

The occupation of Timbuktu only came to an end when French and Malian forces intervened in January 2013, expelling the militants from the city. Though this has restored a measure of stability, the legacy of the occupation and the divisions it created have persisted. In particular, the city's Arab and Tuareg minorities were subjected to reprisals by other residents who accused them of sympathizing with Ansar Dine. Besides looting of shops and homes, many were reportedly forced to flee the city. However, an organization set up in the wake of the conflict, the Timbuktu Renaissance Action Group, seeks to rebuild social cohesion by reviving what the city came close to losing during its occupation – Timbuktu's rich and multi-faceted culture.

The planned cultural revival will incorporate music festivals, documentary films, preservation and exhibition of the manuscripts, as well as the creation of a cultural centre in Timbuktu to share

them. A prime aim is to return to Timbuktu the 'Festival au Désert', once a magnet for musicians and enthusiasts from all over the world who came to enjoy a range of different art forms, including traditional Tuareg music. Though at present the festival is still in exile, efforts to bring it back are ongoing. Other organizations, such as UNESCO, are also supporting heritage restoration, with a number of shrines in the process of being rebuilt – beginning with three shrines of saints with different ethnicities to symbolize Mali's diversity.

The need to protect cultural heritage in the world we live in is more important than ever, particularly as armed groups increasingly target sites of spiritual or historic significance with the specific aim of creating dissent. By contrast, restoring Timbuktu's cultural heritage will encourage conciliation and promote a shared sense of belonging while protecting the many distinct identities of its population.

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