

## Iconic Archive: Timbuktu and its manuscripts in public discourse

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On the morning of 28 January 2013, just before the Franco-Malian recapture or liberation of Timbuktu after ten months of rebel occupation,<sup>1</sup> the mayor of the city, Hallè Ousmane, reported from his exile in Bamako that the Ahmed Baba Institute – home to thousands of African Arabic manuscripts – had been burnt by departing rebels. He had no other details. Thus, rumours about the burning of ‘the library of Timbuktu’ and more than ‘25 000 of its ancient manuscripts’ were born and spread like wildfire, making front-page headlines in the international media. Newspaper, radio and Internet reports spoke of the ‘barbaric’ nature of the ‘destruction of precious world heritage’, with clear undertones of a ‘clash of civilisations’ discourse. This was another proof of ‘Islamist’ depravity, of the irreconcilable differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’, of the ‘threat’ to the values of the civilised world from the ‘monsters’ with whom no dialogue is possible.

In addition to the initial reports, images soon began to surface. Alex Crawford, a Sky News journalist who was there with the French forces, aired footage from the new Ahmed Baba archive building, built by the South Africa of Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance era. Impactful images showed empty manuscript preservation boxes thrown on the floor, burnt leather pouches and a pile of ashes, as an ‘Ahmed Baba worker’ narrated the utter destruction imparted by retreating insurgents. At the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project’s office at the University of Cape Town,<sup>2</sup>