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The reconstruction of the mausoleums of Timbuktu, an integrated approach.

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By the beginning of 2012, armed groups invaded the northern part of Mali with not only the intention to establish a new “kalifate”, but also to eradicate the local culture and history, as well as the living traditions, with the intention to impose their own rules. As a provocative symbol of their power, in June 2012, these armed groups used the opportunity of the World Heritage Committee meeting in St-Petersburg (Russia) to destroy a first series of Mausoleums which were the main components of the property inscribed on the World Heritage List since 1988. Considered as being an outstanding witness of the history of western Africa over the 2nd Millennium, Timbuktu is composed of three historic mosques and 16 mausoleums surrounding and protecting the city. This first series of destruction that included the pulling out of the “sacred gate” of Sidi Yahia mosque was further followed by the destruction, in September and December 2012, of two other series of mausoleums.

UNESCO took immediately stock of the situation with its Director General, Mrs Irina Bokova, alarming the international community including the International Criminal Court and the UN Security Council. Immediate action was taken by UNESCO with the allocation of funds to allow Mali to establish a National Committee and support the ratification of the 1999 Second Protocol for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. In addition and in anticipation of a possible military intervention by Mali and international armies, heritage “passports” and maps with geographical coordinates were elaborated with the assistance of CRAterre so as to ensure that no heritage site would be targeted during the intervention.

Those preventive actions coordinated by UNESCO proved to be useful as, just a few weeks later, French and African troops launched this intervention in January 2013, in an effort to support the Mali army in freeing the northern zones of Mali. This successful military intervention was immediately followed on February 3, 2013, by a visit from the French Head of State to Timbuktu accompanied by the Director-General of UNESCO. This joint effort between France, UNESCO and the Government of Mali -through its Ministry of Culture – led to the organisation of an international conference at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, on February 18. The Action Plan which derived from the conference confirmed the importance of these mausoleums to the all Malians, as well as the need to have them rebuilt using local communities’ knowledge and know-how. Consequently, a tripartite declaration by the Ministers of culture of France and Mali together with the Director-General of UNESCO was published with the title “Nous reconstruons les mausolées de Tombouctou¹”.

With this goal in mind, both Malian and international experts were invited to reflect, first for the assessment of the situation in-situ, and then, on a methodological approach and, further, on a strategic document to be used as a roadmap to guide action to be taken at various levels and locations. This was started with the organisation of a first joint mission in Timbuktu on June 6 Pict. 1), 2013, the collection of existing documentation and also the organisation of a national seminar that drew from the basis of what later became the “strategic document” on one part and the “project document” on the other part. Those were complementary, one being the guide on how, when and who would be undertaking the activities, the other being

¹ “We will rebuilt the mausoleums of Timbuktu”. Common declaration by Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO, Bruno Maïga, Minister of culture of Mali, and Aurélie Philippetti, Ministry of culture and communication of France.

meant to raise funds and also serve as a tool for ensuring proper administrative and financial accountability by UNESCO and the Government of Mali for reporting to the donors.

Based on that, activities were launched to address these two complementary aspects. Concerning the mausoleums themselves, a lengthy preparatory process was necessary as it was realised that existing documentation on them was very limited, when what could be observed in the ruins appeared to be quite complex. Therefore, in addition to the usual architectural surveys that were to be carried out, additional investigations were developed focusing on 3 main areas of concern: 1) archaeological excavation, in respect to the sacredness of the places; 2) collection of oral traditions within the recognised community leaders and elders; and 3) investigations with interviews of the mausoleums custodians: the families responsible of their management and the masons who hold responsibility for their maintenance. (Pict. 2)

In order to verify the findings of these investigations and the structural hypothesis that could be elaborated out of them, a first reconstruction exercise was carried out. The choice was made for rather simple structures, with two of the smaller mausoleums that had been entirely destroyed at the back of Djingareyber mosque. This work, undertaken in March 2014, was very instructive and fruitful. So many lessons were learnt from technical, spiritual, logistical, organisational and financial points of view that enriched the on-going reflection on how to further organise the reconstruction works. Those was launched a year later when funding had been secured and administrative arrangements made, including special agreements with donors so that full respect of traditional responsibilities of the custodians of the mausoleums could be maintained.

The official launching ceremony was organised on February 24, 2015, with the presence of the Minister of culture of Mali, the head of UNESCO office in Mali and representatives of the donors, including the Swiss Cooperation, the EU delegation in Mali, and MINUSMA who played a paramount role in both providing security and facilitating transport from Bamako to Timbuktu as well as in Timbuktu itself. The reconstruction process was organised in two “waves” with additional adjustments made after the first one. It was completed by the end of the year, though a few additional works were planned for early 2016. (Pict.4)

This quite long process is partly due to the fact that the interventions on the mausoleums were not the only reconstruction/ rehabilitation activities being undertaken in Timbuktu. From the end of 2014, the rehabilitation of several affected private libraries were planned and further undertaken with the perspective of making possible the return of at least some of the famous Timbuktu manuscripts. Besides that, small projects have also been undertaken on the mosques which had forgone several years of maintenance due to the instable situation with of course total neglect during the 2012 occupation.

This idea of integrating the conservation of the mausoleums in a broader perspective, that of improving the living conditions in Timbuktu, led to also take into account some elements of the old city fabric. This is where the municipality of Timbuktu was more peculiarly active. With the assistance of CRAterre and Malians experts, and with the financial support of AIMF², a process to rehabilitate some of the affected houses of families that suffered significantly from the occupation was organised (Pict. 3). In total, fifty houses of carefully selected families have been restored with reasonable allocations that allowed for the organisation of the families to undertake projects with their masons on their own houses. This project has been considered as exemplary, recognised with the CGLU international prize. It is now being considered for extension as all partners involved have recognised the efficiency of the

² AIMF, Association internationale des maires francophones.

structure put in place for its organisation, and how far it has advanced the immediate needs of many affected families of Timbuktu and facilitated the return of confidence and self-pride to the inhabitants of the old city with a strong impact for the conservation of its overall integrity.

The most recent event of the reconstruction process of Timbuktu is the reinstallation of the sacred gate of Sidi Yahia mosque. Three years after it had been pulled out, the wooden gate which was restored by local artisans under the supervision of national and international experts was replaced. This event was the occasion of a special ceremony during which the importance of this new and decisive step in Mali's reconstruction and peace building work was stressed. During her speech, the UN Deputy Special Representative of Secretary-General in Mali, Mrs. Mbaranga Gasarabwe declared: *"We are all gathered here today to block the road that leads to obscurantism, violent extremism and fundamentalism. In restoring this gate, the city of Timbuktu and the whole of Mali are reaffirming their will to walk along the path of enlightenment, tolerance, peace and respect for diversity, in the spirit of the peace agreement."*

Today the situation in northern Mali remains fragile. Therefore, a consolidation phase is proposed by UNESCO to continue assisting the Government of Mali in its efforts to sustain the current safeguarding activities of the heritage under its custody, towards a full recovering its capacity for taking care of it for the long term. Meanwhile, the municipality of Timbuktu prepares for a new series of housing restorations, a paramount aspect in the perspective of a full recovery of the overall mystic city of Timbuktu. Though, it will also be time to give more consideration to the other world heritage sites in northern Mali: the Tomb of Askia in Gao, the Old city of Djenne and the Bandiagara Cliff. Actually, these World Heritage properties are also under threat as they have seriously suffered from the instability and in particular from the drastic loss of tourist revenue.

Pictures :



1. The mausoleum of AlTawaty. During the first joint mission in June 2013, a security officer spontaneously honours the saint with a short prayer. © CRAterre, T. Joffroy



2. The reconstruction of ben Amar mausoleum, under the supervision of the elders of the masons' corporation. © CRAterre, T. Joffroy



3. One of the houses restored within the Timbuktu municipality – AIMF project. © CRAterre, T. Joffroy



4. The mausoleum of Alpha Moya after its reconstruction. © UNESCO, S. Rieussec