



# The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And Their Race to Save the Worlds Most Precious Manuscripts

By Joshua Hammer

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In the 1980s, a young adventurer and collector for a government library, Abdel Kader Haidara, journeyed across the Sahara Desert and along the Niger River, tracking down and salvaging tens of thousands of ancient Islamic and secular manuscripts that were crumbling in the trunks of desert farmers. His goal was to preserve this crucial part of the world's patrimony in a gorgeous library. But then Al Qaeda showed up at the door. The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu tells the incredible story of how Haidara, a mild-mannered archivist and historian from the legendary city of Timbuktu, became one of the world's greatest and most brazen smugglers by saving the texts from sure destruction. With bravery and patience, he organized a dangerous operation to sneak all 350,000 volumes out of the city to the safety of southern Mali. This real-life thriller is a reminder that ordinary citizens often do the most to protect the beauty and imagination of their culture. It is also the story of a man who, through extreme circumstances, discovered his higher calling and was changed forever by it.

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### Editorial Review

Review

**\*\*New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice\*\***

“This is, simply, a fantastic story, one that has been beautifully told by Josh Hammer, who knows and loves Mali like some farmers know their back forty. At a time of unprecedented cultural destruction taking place across the Muslim world, Abdel Kader Haidara, the savior of Timbuktu’s ancient manuscripts and this book’s main character, is a true hero. If you are feeling despair about the fate of the world, *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is a must-read, and a welcome shot in the arm.” (Jon Lee Anderson, author of *The Fall of Baghdad*)

“[*The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*] has all the elements of a classic adventure novel [and] it is a story that couldn’t be more timely. . . . Suffice it to say that [the librarians] earn their “bad ass” sobriquet several times over. Riveting skullduggery, revealing history and current affairs combine in a compelling narrative with a rare happy ending.” (*Seattle Times*)

“*The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* . . . vividly captures the history and strangeness of [Timbuktu] in a fast-paced narrative that gets us behind today’s headlines of war and terror. This is part reportage and travelogue . . . part intellectual history, part geopolitical tract and part out-and-out thriller.” (*Washington Post*)

“I’ve long known that the versatile Joshua Hammer could drop into the midst of a war or political conflict anywhere in the world and make sense of it. But he has outdone himself this time, and found an extraordinary, moving story of a quiet—and successful—act of great bravery in the face of destructive fanaticism.” (Adam Hochschild, author of *King Leopold’s Ghost* and *To End All Wars*)

“Part history, part scholarly adventure story and part journalist survey of the volatile religious politics of the Maghreb region. . . . Hammer writes with verve and expertise.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

“A picaresque and mysterious adventure that rushes across the strife-torn landscape of today’s Mali, *The Bad-Ass Librarians* tells the unlikely but very real story of a band of bookish heroes from Timbuktu and their desperate race—past dangerous checkpoints, through deserts, and often in the dead of night—to save a culture and a civilization from destruction. Josh Hammer has seen firsthand how ordinary people can respond with extraordinary heroism when faced with evil. He also gives us a dramatic example of what it means to stick with a story; he knows this one from the beginnings in the late 1300s up until the present day, with its extremism and acts of cultural repression and erasure. Hammer has an unerring sense of what matters and his storytelling is impassioned and fun at the same time.” (Amy Wilentz, author of *Farewell, Fred Voodoo*)

“Gripping [and] ultimately moving. . . . History depends on whose stories get told and which books survive; in Timbuktu, thanks to Haidara and his associates, inquiry, humanity, and courage live on in the libraries.” (*Boston Globe*)

“A completely engrossing adventure with a sharp--and prescient--political edge. Josh Hammer, a veteran

correspondent of numerous conflict zones, tells a fascinating story about the quest to save Timbuktu's priceless Islamic writings from the grasp of jihadists. This is an entertaining, and extremely timely, book about the value of art and history and the excesses of religious extremism." (Janet Reitman, author of *Inside Scientology*)

"Hammer has pulled off the truly remarkable here—a book that is both important and a delight to read. *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is the wonderfully gripping story of Abdel Kader Haidara and the hundreds of ordinary Malians who, at great personal danger, endeavored to save the ancient fabled manuscripts of Timbuktu from destruction by Islamic jihadists. It is also an inspirational reminder that, even as the forces of barbarism extend their thrall across so much of the Muslim world, there are still those willing to risk everything to preserve civilization. A superb rendering of a story that needs to be told." (Scott Anderson, author of *Lawrence in Arabia*)

"This book is a particularly adventurous and impressive example of the fact that, even with time, water, fire, mold, and termites, humanity remains the greatest threat to books and our literary, historical, and creative heritage." (*San Francisco Chronicle*)

"While the destructive acts of Islamic extremists worldwide capture headlines, countless stories of heroic resistance rarely receive attention. Award-winning journalist Hammer shines a light on one such episode of bravery and defiance. . . . *Bad-Ass Librarians* is a rousing salute to ordinary civilians who make a stand to preserve cultural heritage against all odds." (*Discover Magazine*)

"Hammer tells the dramatic story of how, during the period of Islamist rule, a group of Timbuktu residents saved some 350,000 ancient manuscripts that had resided in the city since its medieval heyday as a great center of learning and scholarship. . . . In addition to weaving a great yarn, Hammer also provides a fascinating history of Timbuktu and its books and a well-informed account of the struggle against Islamist extremism in the Sahel." (*Foreign Affairs Magazine*)

"There are nail-biting moments when everything hangs in the balance [and] one can almost imagine the movie version. . . . Excellent." (*Dallas Morning News*)

"Gripping. . . . *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* tells the tale of how a gutsy collector saved thousands of documents. . . . It was only because of Abdel Kader Haidara and a group of brave librarians that these manuscripts about poetry, music, sex, and science did not end lost in the desert or up in smoke." (*Salon*)

"On one level, *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is a thriller that revolves around one long chase scene, as librarian race through the deserts of Mali trying to salvage a trove of precious manuscripts from jihadists hell-bent on their destruction. The stakes in this chase are no less than civilization itself. On another level, Joshua Hammer's book is about a struggle between Islamic ideologies—one jihadist, inflexible and violent, and the other open and intellectual. Joshua Hammer's book could not be more relevant to today's events." (Barbara Demick, author of *Nothing To Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*)

"Hammer crafts a thoughtful history of the Middle East and Africa in a narrative that goes beyond the one- and two-dimensional views that are popular today [and] provides a geopolitical explainer that gives context to the development of radical Islam. . . . The book's title isn't overstated. Haidara, and those who aided him, truly are 'bad-ass.'" (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*)

"The sources of Timbuktu's vitality—the connections to travel and trade that once made it a meeting place for West Africans and a haven for writing and learning—have been destroyed, and Hammer's book, to its

great credit, makes us see what a loss that is." (*New York Review of Books*)

"Hammer does a service to Haidara and the Islamic faith by providing the illuminating history of these manuscripts, managing to weave the complicated threads of this recent segment of history into a thrilling story." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"[A] vivid, fast-paced narrative. . . . Hammer draws on many—often dangerous—visits to the city and interviews with major players to chronicle the efforts of Abdel Kader Haidara to save priceless literary and historical manuscripts. . . . A chilling portrait of a country under siege and one man's defiance." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"At once a history, caper and thriller." (*The Economist*)

"A jaunty gem of a book.... The greatest merit of *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* is that it convincingly repudiates extremist Islamism at the quotidian level, at which it does not pose a global threat: it is objectionable not just because it imperils Westerners, their friends and the existing political order, but also because it is socially and intellectually retrograde, and abusive of the people it purports to protect." (*Survival (International Institute for Strategic Studies)*)

"As precarious and fraught with obstacles as any Hollywood heist. . . . Both a moving story of quiet heroism and a fascinating glimpse into a country little-known in the U.S., *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* will appeal to historians, bibliophiles and those who love a good heist narrative." (*Shelf Awareness*)

"Illuminating reading." (*Booklist*)

"An engaging, well-plotted historical adventure that will appeal to history and book lovers." (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*)

"Engrossing. . . . To call this book a page-turner is to diminish it; the suspense that Hammer creates is vital, but it's his shrewd reporting on cultural terrorism--and those who fought against it--that makes *The Bad-Ass Librarians* so important. No book lover should miss it." (*Fine Books & Collections Magazine*)

"Hammer gives the badass librarians of Timbuktu—who outwitted al-Qaeda, saving ancient Arabic texts from being destroyed—their due." (*Vanity Fair*)

"An engrossing tale, complete with a dangerous smuggling operation." (*Bustle (Best Books of April)*)

"[A] powerful narrative. . . . Hammer's clearly written and engaging chronicle of the achievements of Timbuktu, the risks presented to this area, and portraits of several brave and dedicated individuals brings to light an important and unfamiliar story." (*Library Journal*)

"Gripping." (*Houston Chronicle*)

"Hammer exposed my ignorance. Without thinking about it, I had accepted the conventional wisdom . . . but *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu* provides irrefutable evidence that culture and learning in Africa were far more advanced than in Europe by the 16th century when Timbuktu flourished as a center of learning." (*Washington Independent Review of Books*)

"Journalist Josh Hammer deftly offers up a string of interconnected tales, ranging from ancient Islamic

scholarship to in-fighting in US political circles to French military campaigns and the rise of radical extremists throughout Africa. . . . But always front and center is the fate of these manuscripts and how their very existence puts a lie to the hateful extremism fueling the terrorists who would destroy them. Librarians are always bad-ass but even the most hardcore would have to tip their hats to the brave ones depicted here." (*BookFilter*)

#### About the Author

Joshua Hammer was born in New York and graduated from Princeton University with a cum laude degree in English literature. He joined the staff of *Newsweek* as a business and media writer in 1988, and between 1992 and 2006 served as a bureau chief and correspondent-at-large on five continents. Hammer is now a contributing editor to *Smithsonian* and *Outside*, a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, and has written for publications including the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, the *Conde Nast Traveler*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Atavist*. He is the author of three non-fiction books and has won numerous journalism awards. Since 2007 he has been based in Berlin, Germany, and continues to travel widely around the world.

Paul Boehmer is a seasoned actor who has appeared on Broadway, film, and television, including *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *All My Children*. Coinciding with another of his passions, sci-fi, Paul has been cast in various roles in many episodes of *Star Trek*.

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The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu

## 1

Abdel Kader Haidara was a small boy when he first learned about the hidden treasures of Timbuktu. In the Haidaras' large house in Sankoré, the city's oldest neighborhood, he often heard his father mention them under his breath, as if reluctantly revealing a family secret. Dozens of young boarders from across the Sahel region of Africa, the vast, arid belt that extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, came to study mathematics, science, astrology, jurisprudence, Arabic, and the Koran at the traditional school that his father ran in the vestibule of their home. Consisting of three three-hour sessions beginning before dawn and continuing, at intervals, until the early hours of the evening, the Haidara School was a throwback to the informal universities that had flourished in Timbuktu during its heyday as a center of learning in the sixteenth century. There were thousands of manuscripts at the house in Timbuktu, locked away in tin chests in a storage room behind a heavy oak door. Haidara had a sense of their importance, but he knew very little about them.

Sometimes his father would rummage through the storage room and emerge with a volume from his family's collection—a treatise about Islamic jurisprudence from the early twelfth century; a thirteenth-century Koran written on vellum made from the hide of an antelope; another holy book from the twelfth century, no larger than the palm of a hand, inscribed on fish skin, its intricate Maghrebi script illuminated with droplets of gold leaf. One of his father's most prized works was the original travel diary of Major Alexander Gordon Laing, a Scot who had been the first European explorer to reach Timbuktu via Tripoli and the Sahara, and who was betrayed, robbed, and murdered by his Arab nomadic escorts shortly after departing from the city in 1826. A few years after Laing's murder, a scribe had written a primer of Arabic grammar over the explorer's papers—an early example of recycling. Haidara would peer over his father's shoulder as he gathered students around him, regarding the crumbling works with curiosity. Over time he learned about the manuscripts' history, and how to protect them. Haidara spoke Songhoy, the language of Mali's Sorhai tribe,

the dominant sedentary ethnic group along the northern bend of the Niger River, and in school he studied French, the language of Mali's former colonial masters. But he also taught himself to read Arabic fluently as a boy, and his interest in the manuscripts grew.

In those days—the late 1960s and early 1970s—Timbuktu was linked to the outside world only by riverboats that plied the Niger River when the water level was high enough, and once weekly flights on the state-owned airline to Bamako, the capital of Mali, 440 air miles away. Haidara, the sixth child among twelve brothers and sisters, had little awareness of his town's isolation. He, his siblings, and their friends fished and swam in a five-mile-long canal that led from the western edge of Timbuktu to the Niger. The third longest river in Africa, it is a boomerang-shaped stream that originates in the highlands of Guinea and meanders for one thousand miles through Mali, forming lakes and floodplains, before curving east just below Timbuktu, then flowing through Niger and Nigeria and spilling into the Gulf of Guinea. The canal was the most vibrant corner of the city, a gathering point for children, market women, and traders in dugout canoes, or pirogues, piled high with fruits and vegetables from the irrigated farms that flourished beside the Niger. It was also a place redolent with bloody history: Tuareg warriors hiding on the reed-covered bank on Christmas Day 1893 had ambushed and massacred two French military officers and eighteen African sailors as they paddled a canoe up from the Niger.

Haidara and his friends explored every corner of the Sankoré neighborhood, a labyrinth of sandy alleys lined with the shrines of Sufi saints, and the fourteenth-century Sankoré Mosque—a lopsided mud pyramid with permanent scaffolding made from bundles of palm sticks embedded in the clay. They played soccer in the sandy field in front of the mosque and climbed the lush mango trees that proliferated in Timbuktu in those days, before the southward advance of desertification caused many of them to wither and die, and the canal to dry out and fill with sand. There were few cars, no tourists, no disturbances from the outside world; it was, Haidara would recall decades later, a largely carefree and contented existence.

Abdel Kader's father, Mohammed "Mamma" Haidara, was a pious, learned, and adventurous man who deeply influenced his son. Born in the late 1890s in Bamba, a village hugging the left bank of the Niger River, 115 miles east of Timbuktu, Mamma Haidara had come of age when Mali, then known as French West Sudan—a mélange of ethnic groups stretching from the forests and savannah of the far south, near Guinea and Senegal, to the arid wastes of the far north, toward the Algerian border—had still not fallen under total French control. Fiercely independent Tuareg nomads in the Sahara were carrying on armed resistance, galloping on camels out of the dunes, ambushing the colonial army with spears and swords. It was not until 1916 that they would be completely subdued. After learning to read and write in French colonial schools, Mamma Haidara had commenced a life of travel and study. He had little money, but he was able to hitch rides on camel caravans, and, because he was literate, he could support himself along the way holding informal classes in the Koran and other subjects.

At seventeen he journeyed to the ancient imperial capital of Gao, two hundred miles along the river east of Timbuktu, and to the desert oasis of Araouan, a walled town famed for its scholars and a stop on the ancient salt caravan route through the Sahara. Driven by a thirst for knowledge and for an understanding of the world, he traveled to Sokoto, the seat of a powerful nineteenth-century Islamic kingdom in what is now Nigeria; to Alexandria and Cairo; and to Khartoum, the Sudanese capital situated at the confluence of the White and Blue Niles, and its twin city, Omdurman, across the river, where the army of Major General Horatio Herbert Kitchener defeated a force led by an Islamic revivalist and anticolonialist called the Mahdi in 1895 and established British rule over Sudan.

After a decade of wandering Mamma Haidara returned an educated man, and was named by the scholars of Bamba the town's qadi, the Islamic judicial authority responsible for mediating property disputes and

presiding over marriages and divorces. He brought back illuminated Korans and other manuscripts from Sudan, Egypt, Nigeria, and Chad, adding to a family library in Bamba that his ancestors had begun amassing in the sixteenth century. Eventually Mamma Haidara settled in Timbuktu, opened a school, made money trading grain and livestock, purchased land, and wrote his own manuscripts about reading the stars, and the genealogy of the clans of the city. Scholars from across the region often stayed with the family, and local people visited to receive from the Islamic savant a fatwa—a ruling on a point of Islamic law.

In 1964, four years after Mali won its independence from France, a delegation from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Paris convened in Timbuktu. UNESCO historians had read books written by Ibn Batuta, perhaps the greatest traveler of the medieval world, who visited the land that is now Mali in the first half of the fourteenth century; and Hassan Mohammed Al Wazzan Al Zayati, who wrote under the pen name Leo Africanus while held under house arrest by the pope in Rome during the sixteenth century. The travelers described a vibrant culture of manuscript writing and book collecting centered in Timbuktu. European historians and philosophers had contended that black Africans were illiterates with no history, but Timbuktu's manuscripts proved the opposite—that a sophisticated, freethinking society had thrived south of the Sahara at a time when much of Europe was still mired in the Middle Ages. That culture had been driven underground during the Moroccan conquest of Timbuktu in 1591, then had flourished in the eighteenth century, only to vanish again during seventy years of French colonization. Owners had hidden manuscripts in holes in the ground, in secret closets, and in storage rooms. UNESCO experts resolved to create a center to recover the region's lost heritage, restore to Timbuktu a semblance of its former glory, and prove to the world that Sub-Saharan Africa had once produced works of genius. UNESCO gathered notables to encourage collectors to bring the manuscripts out from their hiding places.

Nine years later, Mamma Haidara, then in his seventies, started working for the Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Research, created by UNESCO in Timbuktu and funded by the ruling families of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Mamma Haidara lent fifteen volumes to the Ahmed Baba Institute's first public exhibition, then traveled house to house in Timbuktu, knocking on doors, trying to persuade other collectors to donate their hidden manuscripts. He was part of a great campaign of education, Abdel Kader Haidara recalled, that was greeted, for the most part, with suspicion and incomprehension. The work intrigued Abdel Kader, but he couldn't imagine following in his father's footsteps. There didn't seem to be much of a future in it.

Mamma Haidara died after a long illness in 1981 in his mid-eighties, when Abdel Kader was seventeen. The notables of the town, along with officials responsible for distributing inheritances, called a meeting of the Haidara family. Abdel Kader, his mother, many of his siblings, and representatives of several brothers and sisters who couldn't attend jammed the vestibule of the family house in Timbuktu's Sankoré neighborhood to listen to a reading of the will. The elder Haidara had left behind land in Bamba, much livestock, a sizable fortune from a grain-trading business, as well as his vast manuscript collection—five thousand works in Timbuktu and perhaps eight times that number in the ancestral home in Bamba. The estate executor divided up the patriarch's businesses, animals, property, and money among the siblings. Then, following a long-standing tradition within the Sorhai tribe, he announced that Mamma Haidara had designated a single heir as the custodian of the family's library. The executor looked around the room. The siblings leaned forward.

“Abdel Kader,” the executor announced, “you are the one.”

Haidara received the news in astonished silence. Although he was the most studious of the twelve siblings, read and wrote Arabic fluently, and had long shown a fascination for the manuscripts, he could not have imagined that his father would entrust their care to somebody so young. The executor enumerated his

responsibilities. “You have no right to give the manuscripts away, and no right to sell them,” he said. “You have the duty to preserve and protect them.” Haidara was unsure what his new role would portend, and was concerned whether he was up to the job. He knew only that the burden was great.

In 1984, Haidara’s mother died after a five-month illness, a loss that deeply affected him. She had been a warm, loving counterpart to Mamma Haidara, who could be a stern disciplinarian. At six years old, Abdel Kader had earned a reputation for fighting with other neighborhood boys, and his father, to rein him in, had dispatched him to study at a Koranic school deep in the Sahara, an austere encampment 150 miles north of Timbuktu. Haidara would describe with affection years later how his mother had labored over the cooking fire in the family courtyard, preparing perfumed rice, couscous, and other treats, then had packed the food into a basket to help ease the journey and provide sustenance throughout the month-long Koranic course. When his mother’s food had run out, young Haidara had stopped eating, and the sheikh in charge had shipped him back in exasperation to his parents in Timbuktu.

Immediately after the funeral of Haidara’s mother, the director of the Ahmed Baba Institute came to the Haidara home to pay his respects. “I need you to come and see me,” he told Haidara, cryptically. A month later Haidara hadn’t shown up. Still coping with his grief, he had totally forgotten about the request. The director dispatched his driver to Haidara’s home. “Please come with me,” the driver said.

The director, Mahmoud Zouber, greeted Haidara at the Ahmed Baba Institute, a quadrangle of limestone buildings with Moorish archways enclosing a sand courtyard planted with date palms and desert acacias. Then in his thirties, Zouber was already regarded as one of the most accomplished scholars in northern Africa. He had started his career as a teacher at a French-Arabic high school in Timbuktu, studied on a Malian government fellowship at Al Azhar University in Cairo, the world’s most prestigious center of Islamic scholarship, and earned his PhD in West African history at the Sorbonne in Paris. Zouber had written his doctoral thesis on the life of Ahmed Baba, a famous intellectual of Timbuktu’s Golden Age, who had been captured by the Moroccan invaders in 1591 and taken as a slave to Marrakesh. Chosen director of the Ahmed Baba Institute in 1973, while still in his twenties, Zouber had raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from Kuwait and Iraq to construct the institute’s headquarters. Then he had built up the archive from nothing—starting with the fifteen manuscripts borrowed from Mamma Haidara’s collection.

A small, courtly man from Mali’s Peul tribe, traditionally farmers and herders who lived along the bend in the Niger River between Timbuktu and Gao, he took Haidara gently by the arm and escorted him through the courtyard and into his office. “Look,” said Zouber. “We worked a lot with your father. He did a great job collecting and educating the population about the manuscripts. And I hope that you will come to work with us as well.”

“Thanks, but I really don’t want to,” Haidara replied. He was contemplating a career in business, perhaps following his father into livestock and grain trading. He wanted to make money, he would explain years later. What he did not want to do, he was quite sure, was spend his days toiling in or for a library.

The director chased Haidara down a second time a few months later. Again he dispatched his driver to Haidara’s home, and summoned him back to the institute. “You have to come,” he said. “I’m going to train you to do this. You’ve got a great responsibility.”

Haidara again mumbled his gratitude for the offer, but politely declined.

“You are the custodian of a great intellectual tradition,” Zouber persisted.

The institute was facing difficulties, the director confided. For the past ten years, a team of eight prospectors had embarked on one hundred separate missions in search of manuscripts. In a decade of driving through the bush in a convoy of four-wheel-drive vehicles, they had accumulated just 2,500 works—an average of less than one a day. After decades of thievery by the French colonial army, the owners had become fiercely protective of their manuscripts and deeply distrustful of government institutions. The appearance of Ahmed Baba prospectors raised alarms that they had come to steal their precious family heirlooms. “Every time they drive into the villages, people are terrified. They hide everything,” Zouber told Haidara, looking him in the eye. “I think that if you come and work for us you’re going to help us bring out the manuscripts. It’s going to be a challenge, but you can do it.”

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