Local Destruction, Global Resonance

A critical analysis of the international response to the destruction of cultural property in Timbuktu, Mali in 2012

Sander Mulder (4154339)

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Utrecht University

Supervisor: Dr. Thijs Bouwknegt

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Summary

The destruction of cultural property in conflict areas has been a recurring theme throughout history. In modern conflicts, which are characterized by more complex, asymmetrical warfare, our ideas of these destructions have been challenged. Terrorist groups nowadays do not only intend to destroy symbols that do not correspond with their faith, but place these destructions within their 'global propaganda' of shock and awe.

This thesis tries to answer the following question: *To which extent is the interpretation of the destruction of Timbuktu in July 2012 by the international community obstructed by a sole focus on Islamic terrorism and how can that be explained?* By using the case study of the destruction of multiple mausoleums and shrines in Timbuktu, Mali, this thesis wants to show that in multiple fields, international politics (ex. UN, UNESCO), and international law (the ICC case against Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi), the narrative of global propaganda is taken over by the international community, which leads to a sole focus on Islamic fundamentalism that distracts from the more multi-faceted explanations to the conflict in Mali.

Contents

Introduction

'Symbols give us our identity, our self image, our way of explaining ourselves to ourselves and to others. Symbols in turn determine the kinds of stories we tell and the stories we tell determine the kind of history we make and remake.'

- Mary Robinson, Inauguration speech as president of Ireland, December 3, 1990

Material cultural property is a vital element for the formation of identity. Since architectural constructions - in this case for instance libraries, churches, mosques and cemeteries – can stand the test of time, they embody memories of former generations and therefore contribute to the process of identity formation. Just as much as other material and immaterial expressions of culture, such as art or traditions, buildings belong 'within meaning systems and thereby construct and maintain collective identities,' thereby referring to both the mental as well as the physical representation of the past.[1]

The importance of cultural heritage manifests itself in international bodies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), who commit themselves to the task '[of] encouraging the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity.'[2] However, history has shown time and time again that the intentional destruction of cultural property is a continuous phenomenon during conflict and wartime. Over the course of modern history, many events exemplify the political and military use of destruction as a symbolic, and therefore psychological trope of warfare. Both the Reich Kristallnacht in November 1938, when German authorities supported the destruction of Jewish shops, buildings and synagogues, as well as the terrorist attacks of '9/11' in New York are vivid examples of this problem.

Most recently, the conflict situations in the Middle East and Sahel-region in Africa have led to the same incidents where internationally protected cultural heritage was destroyed. This thesis will specifically focus on the casus of Mali, where in July 2012 the insurgent groups Ansar Dine (Arabic, meaning 'defenders of the fair') and AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb) destroyed religious mausoleum, graves and smaller culturally significant property, such as books and parchments in the ancient city of Timbuktu, which that had already occupied since April that year. During a speech in December that same year, the director-general of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, reacted to the destructions by stating that 'For UNESCO, culture is plural and dynamic, and it has universal meaning. […] From

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[1] Fuist, T.D., 'The dramatization of beliefs, values and allegiances: ideological performances among soical movement groups and religious organizations', *Social Movement Studies* 13:4 (2014), 428.

[2] Author unknown, 'World Heritage' on http://whc.unesco.org/en/about/ (Visited: 22 October 2016).

his starting point, UNESCO works to promote culture as a dynamic force that enlarges opportunities and renews societies. [...] The same vision leads us to deplore the destruction in Timbuktu.'[3]

The political discussion that deals with the topic of physical heritage destruction mostly focusses on the question of reconstruction. This also explains why Bokova within the same speech referred numerously to the combined UN and UNESCO mission in Mali that seeks to 'undertake damage assessment, to secure its museum collections and raise awareness.'[4] The same can be said for academics, who have published significantly on the legal and socio-economic dimension of preservation and punishment.[5] However, before these questions can be asked and these plans can be made, one other, under-researched problem lies at its core: what are the precise motivations behind these destructions?

A conflict situation arises in 'any situation where two or more social entities or parties (however defined or structured) perceive that they possess mutually incompatible goals.'[6] Modern conflicts are, within this framework, defined as complex interplays of different actors, who are bounded by incoherent kinship and operate within a multi-leveled structure. Due to the complexity of the situation itself, events are even harder to fully understand. Especially in the public discourse of politics and media, this leads to singular explanations of conflict, where incomplete, but shorter explanations are preferred over longer and often too complicated ones.

This thesis will research whether explanations about the destructions of material cultural heritage during armed conflict follow the same pattern, specifically for the case study of the destruction of mausoleums, shrines and other buildings by Islamic rebel group Ansar Dine in Timbuktu, Mali in in July 2012. Therefore, the main research question for this thesis will be: *To which extent is the interpretation of the destruction of Timbuktu in July 2012 by the international community obstructed by a sole focus on Islamic terrorism and how can that be explained?*

The prevailing focus on religious difference obscures the local reality, where ethnic tensions and economic inequality just as much contributed to the eventual conflict and destruction. This reflection is structured through a three-way analysis: first, a new framework of the destruction of cultural heritage needs to be established that pays attention to the problems of framing within the context of changing, international politics and social media; secondly, this thesis will make a complicit analysis of Mali that specifically looks at the multifaceted, post-colonial nature of the conflict, based upon the existing literature; finally, by making a contrast between the analysis of the Mali-conflict and the international reactions within politics and law, this discourse analysis can highlight which aspects of the narrative on the destruction of cultural heritage come to the front the most.

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[3] Bokova, Irina, 'Protecting culture in times of war,' address to Académie Diplomatique Internationale in Paris, 3 December 2012.

[4] Ibidem

[5] An example is Auwera, S. van, 'International Law and the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict: Actual Problems and Challenges', *The journal of arts management, law and society* 43 (2013) 175-190.

[6] Mitchell (1981), *The structure of international conflict* (New York; 1981) 11.

In short, this corresponds to the following sub questions:

1. *To which extent take existing theories on the destruction of material cultural heritage take into account the role of framing and international social media techniques?*
2. *How can the attacks on Timbuktu be explained by the local conflict history of northern Mali?*
3. *To which extent do the narratives on the destructions in Timbuktu by international politics and law correspond with the reality of northern Mali and how can the differences between narrative and reality be explained?*

The discourse analysis in the third section is based upon a qualitative analysis of political reactions within the international community, and the juridical sentence of Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2016. Both elements will be analysed by looking at recurrent narratives within their own individual discourses. These are the relevance of cultural heritage; secondly, the specific local context of northern Mali; and finally the framing of the suspected Islamic rebel groups (mostly Ansar Dine).

By doing this discourse analysis and comparing it against the local conflict dynamics of northern Mali, this research warns against simplification and not properly addressing the real causes of the destruction. When the transition to a more holistic approach, that takes into account local, national and international dynamics, is being made, the reaction by international actors can be improved. This improvement, focussed on the preservation and reconstruction of cultural heritage, can help develop new strategies for combatting violence against material culture and make sure that newly restored constructions will not be placed in danger that easily again.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework
Identity, terrorism and the problems of 'global propaganda'

The academic discourse on cultural heritage has for a long time been focussed on the issues of protection and preservation. *The Destruction of Memory* by Robert Bevan in 2006 was one of the first monographs that carefully tracked down the long-lasting history of heritage destruction as intentional weapons of war.[7] Due to the new nature of warfare, more intra-state, the nature of heritage destruction has also changed. This is influenced by the rise of international terrorism as well.

This chapter aims to combine all the interlinking, but not yet connected pieces of theoretical material that have been written on the motivations behind and effects of the destruction of cultural property in the context of the post-Cold War era. The effects of 'global propaganda', where terrorists destroy cultural heritage with the goal of specifically angering the international community, are noteworthy for the later analysis of this thesis.

1.1 New wars, and the importance of (sub)identities

After the Second World War and starting in the Cold War, a transition took place that established new dynamics and interpretations of conflict situations. The two world wars were mostly characterized by a clear overview of battling actors, nation states that all had their individual enemies and alliances; an image that changed afterwards. Conflicts after the Second World War started out regionally and were pushed into the international, bipolar zone by proxy wars, when one or both of the super powers economically or politically supported a warring party.

Most of these conflicts, however, were still between states and therefore did not mean a radical discontinuity from the old dominance of nation state based conflict. This changed at the end of the twentieth century; conflicts were about conflicts *between* state to conflicts *within* state . More often, conflict over political leadership within a political unity arises. The International Criminal Court acknowledges this type of conflict by defining it as '[a]rmed disputes [which] take place in the territory of a State when there is protracted armed conflict between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups.'[8]

Mary Kaldor classifies these modern day conflicts as 'new (civil) wars'. The 'newness' of this theory has raised a lot of discussion, since the strict division it implies can not be proved easily. Sigrid van der Auwera, a Dutch archaeologist, therefore asks herself: 'when were they introduced and were

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[7] Bevan, R., *The Destruction of Memory* (Islington; 2006).

[8] Vité, S. 'Typology of armed conflicts in international humanitarian law: legal concepts and actual situations', *International Review of the Red Cross* 91 (2009).

some of them not always features of internal war?'[9] Klep elaborates on this question by pointing out that the new war-theory of Kaldor provides more of a specific focus then a rather complete new theory. The focus points according to him are 'the effects of globalisation, identity based politics and the rise of new war economies.'[10] He explains himself further by stating that 'In new wars, not as much the (geo)political ideology is at its core, but war in itself. Economic profit and identity politics are autonomous, violence inducing goals. Therefore, state structures are broken down, a process that globalisation has created as much as empowered.'[11]

Identity is of crucial importance. Because the fighting actors do not necessarily seek a political goals, and therefore are just as much empowered by ideological, ethnical or religious oppositions, identity creates a corner stone of political mobilisation. The mobilisation requires a clear framing of the enemy, that eventually justifies violence as the only logical solution. According to Kaldor, this led to

> 'The aim [of most wars in the 1980s and 1990s] is to control the population
> by getting rid of everyone of a different identity […] Hence the strategic goal
> of these wars is population expulsion through various means such as mass
> killing, forcible resettlement, as well as a range of political, psychological and
> economic techniques of intimidation.'[12]

This is the point where cultural heritage comes into play. When the purpose of violence is to attack identity as much as possible, is does not only limit itself to physical confrontations. As much references and symbols that contribute to the construction of culture need to be destroyed. 'The contemporary character of heritage, since heritage is created, formed and managed though the questions of the [collective] present,' as Auwera says.[13] The destruction of cultural property serves both a contemporary goal, the intimidation of the enemy, as well as a 'destruction of memory', that places a burden on the coming generations who are limited in their ability to connect and construct their cultural group identity.[14]

To use an example, during the Yugoslavian war in the 1990's, the Bosnian and Croatian forces both fought heavily over the city of Mostar in the south. In 1993, this led to the purposeful destruction of the Start Most, an old bridge that was the main connection between the two parts of the city center, by the Croatian military groups. Since both parts had a Bosnian or Croatian population, this bridge was

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[9] Auwera, S. van den, 'Contemporary Conflict, Nationalism, and the Destruction of Cultural Property During Armed Conflict: A Theoretical Framework', Journal of conflict archeology 7:1 (2012) 52.

[10] Klep, C., 'Oude wijn, nieuwe zakken? Het debat over de aard van moderne gewapende conflicten', in Frerks, G. en B. de Graaf, *Conflict* (2016) 323.

[11] Klep, 'Oude wijn nieuwe zakken?', 328.

[12] Kaldor, *Old and New Wars*, 9.

[13] Auwera, S. van den, 'Contemporary Conflict, Nationalism, and the Destruction of Cultural Property During Armed Conflict', 61.

[14] Bevan, R., *The Destruction of Memory*.

a symbol of the intertwinement of the two cultures, who until the war had live together in peace. In 2015, when the bridge was reconstructed with funds of UNESCO, Serge Brammertz, the head prosecutor of the International Court for the Trial of Yugoslavia (ICTY) said that 'as this reconstruction shows, extremists cannot erase from history our common heritage of diversity, co-existence, and religious pluralism.'[15] Identity, memory and conflict coincided at the bridge. This was also the reason why specific cases were filed against the perpetrators of this destructions, since 'crimes against cultural monuments and institutions are war crimes, and often part of broader ethnic cleansing campaigns […] to protect our common heritage, the perpetrators must be held accountable'. [16]

1.2 Terrorism, global propaganda and 'global destruction'

The example of the Stari Most shows how strategy and symbolism come together when we talk about the destruction of cultural property, but it does not shine a light on all the aspects of Kaldor's theory. Globalisation had an influence on the Yugoslavian war in many ways: the presence of the UN-troops, the international linkages of smaller armies that provided them financial support and the commitment to establishing the ICTY. When we actually zoom in and only look at the destruction of the Stari Most, we see a local conflict that is placed within the national conflict and does not reach out to a larger, international purpose.

Terrorism that has occurred in the twenty-first century, mostly the religious fundamentalist violence by groups such as Al-Qaeda and IS, connects identity to the global level by the kinship linkages of their fighters and new technologies such as social media. Violence takes place on a regional level, but transcends it by spreading fear to a larger, not immediately connected crowd. The framing strategy of groups such as Al-Qaeda and IS is to create the biggest possible groups of allies and adversaries that is not restricted by national borders. Galli therefore states that 'the internal and external bleed into one other until they disappear and lose sense. The world is One, although not Unitarian: globalizations does not bring stability but movement and contradictions.'[17]

From a performative view, we can state that the 'utterances', the words that are spoken to effectively call upon action, are 'multivocal': 'they may communicate different things to different audiences and even communicate different things simultaneously to the same audience.'[18] A beheading can at the same time lead to attract allies as well as repulse and humiliate enemies. Video's that show the destruction of cultural heritage serve the same purpose as these video's with violence against humans do. In many short, mostly grainy recordings, the leaders of these terrorist organisations justify their attacks by linking it to a purification of the Islamic identity.

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[15] ICTY Digest 154 (22 October 2015).
[16] Ibidem.
[17] Galli, C., A. Minervini, and A. Sitze, 'On War and on the Enemy', *The New Centennial Review* 9:2 (2009) 214.
[18] Fuist, T.D., 'The dramatization of beliefs, values and allegiances', 431.

The purification already links to a larger, cross-national goal. Heritage is therefore a useful target, since it as well touches upon internationally shared feelings of ancestry. Within the globalized world, this has let to the intentional display of destruction as a part of what Smith calls 'global propaganda'.[19] She elaborate on this statement by saying that 'World Heritage sites become particularly vulnerable as meaning is constructed at a larger scale through modern media channels.'[20] Social media in this way supports the multivocal view of propaganda and framing: the destruction of a local museum can be seen as a purification and an act of war, just depending on the viewpoint. At the same time, global propaganda refers as well to the goals of terrorists to enrage the international community by showing them their incapability of acting against it.

The same dilemma was shown when in 2001 the Taliban blew up two 30 meter high Buddhist statues in the Bamiyan valley between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The internationally acclaimed pieces of architecture were, according to the Taliban, destroyed due to their non-Islamic nature. This destruction was a precursor for the violent, essentialist politics that would come in the years after. Surprisingly, Western journalist were invited to report live on the destruction by leaders of the Taliban.[21] It shows again that the global impact of destructions are an important element of the framing campaign. By harming targets that have an international character, the framing resonance exceeds the smaller subidentity borders it was subjected to until then.

1.3 Conclusion: a more complex view

The biggest problem of framing within the global discourse is that narratives are even faster generalised. Terrorism, with its own global propaganda of shock, awe and fear has let to the issue that all acts of violence that are related to the Islamic ideology are interpreted within the same frame. The global resonance has resulted in global Orientalism, the idea coined by Edward Said that 'shows that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.'[22] By seeing the Islam and related violence as one inflexible entity, we obscure our image of the complex nature of conflict today.

In that way, global propaganda is a very effective as well. Terrorists can always use the destruction of cultural heritage because they know how the reaction will be and where the anger will focus upon. It almost works likes a reinforcing circle: the destructions lead to shock; the shock leads to anger against the terrorists that showcases itself in essentialist claims of the Islam; this angers Muslims who as an answer join (terrorist organisations) that later one use that same destruction technique again.

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[19] Smith, C., 'Social Media and the Destruction of World Heritage as Global Propaganda', Proceeding of the II International Conference of Best Practices in World Heritage: People and Communities (April 29 to May 2, 2015).
[20] Ibidem
[21] Flood, F.B., 'Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum', *The Art Bulletin* 84:4 (2002) 641-659.
[22] Saïd, Edward, *Orientalism*.

It is important to break that cycle and see how on one side the global propaganda can work (see the discourse analysis in chapter 3), but at the same time that political reaction is a limited view of the reality. Snow and Byrd note that

> 'The concept of ideology is often encumbered by two misleading tendencies: the first is to view ideology in a homogenized, monochromatic manner; the second is to conceptualize it as a tightly coupled, inelastic set of values, beliefs and ideas. Both of these tendencies cloud our understanding of social movements, in general and terrorist movements in particular.'[23]

The goals of the rest of this thesis is therefore to highlight the complex nature of these destructions and show how the complex interplay of ethnicity, framing and conflict lead to the destruction of cultural property.

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[23] Snow, D.A. and S.C. Byrd, 'Ideology, framing and Islamic terrorist movements', *Mobilization: AN International Quaterly Review* 12:1 (2007) 132-133.

Chapter 2
A conflict analysis of the 2012 crisis in Mali and the destruction of Timbuktu

The situation in Mali is a very complex, multi-faceted conflict. From functioning as a 'model African democracy',[24] its stability soon spiralled down after Tuareg-rebels claimed sovereignty in the northern part of the nation, calling it Azawed, and soldiers threw a coup in the capital of Bamako. In a briefing to the Dutch parliament before joining the *UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali* (MINUSMA), the Dutch Defense Department stated that 'interventions in the area of security, law, strengthening the governmental structures, socio-economic developments and the promotion of the democratic political process all needed to be carried out within one cooperative system.'[25] Without a '3D-approach', a conflict as complex as the one in Mali, would never be resolved. Due to its turbulent history, multi-ethnic population and geographic closeness to other conflict areas such as Algeria and Libya, this turned out to be almost impossible.

For an critical analysis of the international reaction to destructions in Timbuktu it is vital to understand the underlying process and internal complexities of the fighting parties. As already noted in the introduction, the main argument in this thesis is that religion is treated as the dominant feature used by the international community to reflect on the destructions of Timbuktu. However, this chapter will look at a broader set of interpretative tropes to eventually make the claim that the Islamic fundamentalism of Ansar Dine could only work because of bigger ethnic resentment in the northern parts of Mali and the regional and international connections. First of all, this chapter will analyse the north-south divisions that are the underlying cause to all issues in Mali; secondly, the growing international linkages between the northern part of Mali and other regions (Algeria, Libya, Islamic NGO's) will be addressed to eventually show how this interplay of actors have led to the fall of Timbuktu in the beginning of 2012.

2.1 The North-South divide: A postcolonial present

Most issues that led to the conflict in Mali can be traced back to the colonial French rule and the political decisions that were made during the transitional period of the independence in the 1960s. Mali is a very dispersed country, with big geographical, economic and ethnic differences between the northern and southern parts. However, instead of paying attention to the differences, colonial and postcolonial elites disregarded mutual distrust and during the periods of intra-state conflict even used the North-South divide as a divisive tactic.

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[24] Thurston, A., 'Mali: The desintegration of a 'Model African Democracy', *Stability* 2:1 (2013), 1-7.
[25] Brief aan de voorzitter van de Tweede Kamer, Betreft artikel 100-brief MINUSMA (1 november 2013).

Timbuktu and Djenné, two large cities in the north of Mali, formed the economic centres of the ancient Mali empire. Due to their logistically smart location, close to the Niger river that goes far into Africa, the Tuareg, Arab and Songhay populations who lived in this region were able to rule the Sahel region during the fourteenth century.[26] When the French occupied the region in the nineteenth century, they however decided to focus their educational efforts on the sub-Saharan populations that lived in the south. The Southern populations already had negative perceptions of the Northern populations, mostly the Tuareg, who they framed as 'rezzou', a group of hostile raiders who only lived through conquest, plunder and the capture of slaves.[27] In the postcolonial state-building phase, these frameworks of the Northern populations as security threats to national unity manifested itself in a restricted political representation of, for instance, the Tuareg and Songhay in the political bodies.

The hostility towards the North reversely also lead to the formation of rebel-groups in the Northern regions of the country, who were hoping that their part of Mali, what they themselves called Azawad, could become independent. The Tuareg, even though they consisted of numerous groups, sometimes united against the military occupation and these rebellions created persistent threats to the national government.[28] The leader of the Tuareg rebel movement, Iyad ag Ghali, member of the Ifoghas Tuarag group, was able to overcome some of the divisions between the Nothern populations and forced the Bamako-government into a peace-agreement that consisted of principles such as 'a significant military withdrawal from the northern regions, a massive integration of the rebels into the Malian army, greater territorial political autonomy (with the creation of elected local assemblies holding sovereign powers in the economic and the security fields), and an ambitious development programme.' [29]

Even though these arrangements provided a good framework for further peace negotiations, the Bamako-government never fully trusted the tribes in the North and therefore never fully implemented the designed plans. The in 2002 elected president Amadou Toumani Touré escalated the tensions by choosing for a different strategy; instead of paying attention to the claims that only Iyad ag Ghali's closest supporters benefitted from the government's treatment of the north, Touré proposed a strategy that was focussed on feeding divisions within non-Ifoghas Tuareg communities.

Overall, the effect of the tribalisation that Touré tried to accomplish led to a fragmented and unstable situation in the North during the tumultuous period around a new large rebellion in 2006. The Tuareg, Arabs, Songhay and Arab communities all had their own militias that were competing against each other and in cooperation with the Malian army. At this point in the conflict, international forces came more to the front as well.

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[26] Chilson, P., *We never knew exactly where: dispatches from the lost country of Mali* (Washington; 2013) 26-27.
[27] Chauzal, G. and T. van Damme, 'The roots of Mali's conflict: moving beyoud the 2012 crisis' (The Hague, 2015) 19.
[28] Lecocq, B. et. Al., 'One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analystst; A multucovcal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in het divided Republic of Mali', *Review of African Political Economy* 137 (2013) 5.
[29] Chauzal, G. and T. van Damme, 'The roots of Mali's conflict', 32.

2.2 The regional and international connections of the Mali conflict

As already mentioned before, the Sahel region has always been a network of international, even intercontinental, trade. The former Mali Empire had effectively used it for their own welfare, but that rapidly decreased after a few decades. In the current situation of the multiple rebellions after 2006, four non-North forces were clearly visible in the region: the Bamako government (at this moment more and more supported by the international community), Algeria, Libya and Islamic terrorist groups, most notably AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb, which originated in Algeria).

Algeria and Libya were both looking for control over the region. Qadaffi, the political leader of Libya mostly saw opportunities for more power in the region, so he recruited Tuareg communities who had fled to Libya during earlier oppositions and droughts in the 1970s. Fighting within Qadaffi's army, they quickly became well-equipped and well-trained. However, when in 2011, the Qadaffi government fell down, the communities returned to the northern parts of Mali, forming a security risk there. Algeria mostly saw Mali as a good region to expel their own internal terrorist problems to. Therefore their own counter-terrorism program reinforced security issues in Mali.[30]

The international support for the Bamako government was necessary with this influx of groups in the northern territories. However, the security focus of the international community neglected other, more under-the-surface issues. Researchers of the Clingendael institute noted that 'mainly focussed on fighting terrorist groups and traffickers, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, international partners have neglected other aspects that could have prevented the insecurity from growing, for example supporting local economic development and involving Malian actors in order to create stability.'[31]

This stability came from the last group, Islamic NGO's (from other Islamic nations such as Qatar and Saudi-Arabia) and newly organised terrorist groups AQIM and Ansar Dine ('defenders of the Islamic Faith', a group by Iyad ag Ghali), 'buying the support of local criminal networks and the goodwill of the northern community' by providing them with new technologies and medicines. An approach like this 'enabled the organisation to conduct its [illegal] activities without being bothered by the state and allowed it to attract young recruits, […] disappointed by the lack of other economic perspectives.'[32] These root networks were decisive in the battles after the 2012 rebellion and the occupation of Timbuktu.

2.3 Conclusion

In January 2012, a joint effort by AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West-Africa) attacked multiple big cities in the northern part of Mali. Previously in 2011, the MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) had intensified its rebellions against the army for the independence of Azawad, another name for the north-Mali region. However, at this point in time,

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[30] Lecocq, B. et. Al., 'One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analystst,' 8-9.

[31] Chauzal, G. and T. van Damme, 'The roots of Mali's conflict', 30.

[32] Ibidem, p. 34.

the Islamic rebel groups formed a better funded, better coordinated and better locally supported campaign. The Clingendael researchers as well noted that 'the speed and ease […] has demonstrated the weakness of the security programs implemented and the shortcomings of available intellengece data regarding the resources and activity of terrorist organisations.'[33]

The local support came from communities who long ago already lost their hopes in the national government. North-south divisions originated from the post-colonial efforts to unite Mali that eventually led to misrepresentation of the North in political and economic programs. Rebellions that took place in the decenniums afterwards were directed against these decisions, but the aggressive military reaction by the Bamako government only aggravated the situation.

Secondly, the international linkages of the groups gave the rebels a lot of training and funding. Being soldiers in Qaddafi's army and forced out of Algeria's territory gave them both the incentive and skills to achieve in Mali what they had wanted for a long time. In Timbuktu, the biggest Tuareg groups were Iwellemmedan, who shared a common history with both the Tuareg and the Arabs. This provided the joint rebel groups with a useful grass root of ancestry, anger and funding to occupy the city.

Within academic and popular media, Mali is often portrayed as a chaotic situation, that 'faces difficulties returning to democracy'.[34] This glorified picture of the past has never been true, Mali has always struggled to find unity in peace since its independence in 1960. This shock can be seen as an explanation as well for the reactions to the destructions of the mausoleums, shrines and buildings in Timbuktu during raids from July to August 2012. However, this shock muddles our view of the situation. The next chapter will elaborate on the discourse that emerges within the fields of international politics and law after the events.

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[33] Ididem, p. 50.
[34] Al Jazeera, 'Mali faces difficulty returning to democracy' (July 2nd 2013), 2http://www.aljazeera.com/video/africa/2013/07/20137281915559906.html (viewed June 1st 2017).

Chapter 3

A discourse analysis of the international reactions on the destruction of Timbuktu

This chapter will elaborate on what was being concluded in the first chapter of the theoretical framework. Even though identities play a large part in the intentions behind the destruction of cultural property in conflict areas, the march of terrorism has also led to larger goals, where incorporating – and sometimes even infuriating – the international community was another important element of the 'global propaganda'.

With regard to the destructions in Mali in July and August 2012, the international resonance to the images was significant. It is therefore necessary to critically analyse these responses, since they showcase whether international politics, media and law have the ability to go beyond the frame that has been given to them by those who performed the destructions and actually take into account the more complex history that is behind the actions before giving a reaction.

In this chapter, the three most important aspects of the international reaction, politics (mostly the United Nations and France) and law (the trial of Ahmad Al-Faqi Al-Mahdi by the ICC in September 2016), will be analysed and compared. All the individual reactions will be analysed by contrasting the presence of the following discourses: the importance of cultural heritage; the specific local context of northern Mali; and the framing of the suspected Islamic rebel groups (Ansar Dine, MUJAO and AQIM).

3.1 International politics

The destruction of cultural heritage in Timbukte took place during widespread battles in Gao and Timbuktu between the MNLA and multiple Islamist groups (of which Ansar Dine was one). Even though the Mali government had requested military assistance by the international community prior to the events in June 2012, the MINUSMA mission was only established by the UN Security council in April 2013.[35] The slightly biding approach of the international community is also reflected in their reaction to the destructions. The actions by the Islamist coalition were condemned by a lot of international parties, e.g. the UN Security Council, UNESCO, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and European Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This section will dive further into these reactions, by analysing them according to the earlier established tropes. It will mainly focus on the United Nations and affiliated committees, since they are one the most present embodiments of the international political perspective.

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[35] Author unknown, 'MUNISMA Background',
http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/background.shtml (Viewed: May 30, 2016).

1) <u>The importance of cultural heritage</u>

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki Moon, mentioned the destructions very quickly after the actual events, on the first of July 2012. He called on all parties to preserve the cultural heritage of 'the ancient city of Timbuktu' as much as possible.[36] Later that year, during a larger briefing on the situation in Mali to the Security Council, he elaborated a little bit more on the situation by saying that the destroyed mausoleums were part of 'the indivisible heritage of humanity'.[37] Even though these reactions showcase a clear definition by the UN leader of cultural heritage as corner stones of identity, the relevance was decreased by the short time period it was relatively being discussed and the fact that it was not linked clearly to the other economic and military peacekeeping components.

Logically, UNESCO's reaction was more elaborate. Just before real armed conflicts came to an explosion, Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO, labelled the city centre of Timbuktu as Endangered World Heritage 'to inform the international community of threats to the outstanding universal values.'[38] After the battles in Timbuktu, Bokova kept reiterating these statements by calling the mausoleums 'of importance to the whole of humanity'.[39] These constant referrals to world culture do generally work within the space of international relations, since they can create a sense of responsibility for political leaders.

2) <u>The specific local context of northern Mali</u>

Interestingly, in both reactions, the complex nature of the conflict is not being addressed to any satisfying extent. Bokova points at incorporating 'the national authorities concerned as well as the local authorities' into one restauration and conservation plan, without addressing the tensions between parties and acknowledging the social and economic plans that need to accompany that. Reversely, Ban Ki Moon in his speech to the Security Council did refer to the necessity of a more inclusive national Bamako government, acknowledging the 'genuine socio-economic and political grievances.' While doing this, he however did not link the pressing issues of endangered material cultural heritage to the same discourse.

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[36] UN Office of the Secretary General, 'Secretary-General Concerned about Worsening Security in Northern Mali, Reported Destruction of Ancient Timbuktu Mausoleums' (July 2 2012), on: https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sgsm14389.doc.htm (Viewed: May 30, 2017)

[37] UN Office of the Secretary General, 'Resolving Mali Crisis Requires 'Holistic and Comprehensive' Approach, Not Partial, Disconnected Measures, Secretary-General Tells Security Council' (August 8 2012), on: https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sgsm14450.doc.htm (Viewed: May 30, 2017)

[38] UNESCO Press, 'Heritage sites in northern Mali placed on List of World Heritage in Danger', on: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/heritage_sites_in_northern_mali_placed_on_list_of_world_heri/ (Viewed: May 30, 2017)

[39] UNESCO Press, 'Creation of a Special Fund for the Safeguarding of Mali's World Heritage sites'(July 24, 2012), on: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/creation_of_a_special_fund_for_the_safeguarding_of_malis/ (Viewed: May 30, 2017)

Finding solutions to the restauration and preservation of the damaged cultural heritage seem disjointed from long-term local solutions of the conflict. This was highlighted very accurately by a speech of the French prime minister, Francois Hollande, at the second of February 2013 in Bamako, Mali.[40] When talking to high-ranking politicians and military personnel in the lead-up to new fights in the North, Hollande shows respect to the damaged buildings in Timbuktu by referring to them as 'the heritage of mankind.' At the same time, his strive to 'restore Mali's unity, integrity and strength' is so unclearly motivated that it does not represent to challenges of the French led mission in Mali to assist the government towards a transitional society that can stand the possible future uprisings.

3)   The framing of the suspected Islamic rebel groups (Ansar Dine, MUJAO and AQIM)

The use of words when dealing with the topic of terrorism was different between the individual organisations/nations and the big agglomeration of states, in this case the UN. Ban Ki Moon let the word terrorist mostly coincide with criminal; in the speech about Mali that was mentioned earlier at point one, he for instance talks about 'terrorist, religious extremist or criminal activities'. The UN in general kept focussing on the criminal aspect of terrorist organisations and more specifically their use of material cultural heritage as financial opportunities.[41]

This thoughtful is opposite to the harder reactions by UNESCO Their response framed especially Ansar Dine as a thoughtful and intentionally hateful group. Answering questions of reporters, an UNESCO Timbuktu Deputy Sandy Haidara said that it almost looks as if 'was a direct reaction to the UNESCO decision.'[42] Haidara's claim corresponds with the idea of a global tactic to enrage the international community, as was already mentioned in the first chapter.

3.2 International law

In July 2012, Malick Coulibaly, the justice minister of the Mali government, made an official request at the ICC for an investigation 'to determine whether one or more identified persons should be charged with the crimes, the serious and massive violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.'[43] Even though they had a large mandate that allowed them to search for acts of murder, torture,

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[40] Hollande, F. (February 2, 2013), on: http://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article4310 (Viewed: May 30, 2017)
[41] See more specifically the UN resolution 2347 (2017) that points the UN's concern at '[terrorist organisations] generating income from engaging directly or indirectly in the illegal excavation and in the looting and smuggling of cultural property from archaeological sites, museums, libraries, archives, and other sites, which is being used to support their recruitment efforts and to strengthen their operational capability to organize and carry out terrorist attacks.'
[42] France 24, 'Ansar Dine Islamist destroy mausoleums in Timbuktu' (Juy 1, 2012) 'http://www.france24.com/en/20120630-ansar-dine-islamists-destroy-mausoleums-timbuktu-tuaregs-mnla-aqim-qaeda-sidi-mahmoud' (Viewed: May 30, 2017).
[43] Coulibaly, M., Assisting Letter to ICC (July 13, 2012) https://www.icc-cpi.int/NR/rdonlyres/A245A47F-BFD1-45B6-891C-3BCB5B173F57/0/ReferralLetterMali130712.pdf (Viewed: June 2, 2017); this quote is a translation of the following two excerpts: '*Il s'agit de violations graves et massives des droits de l'Homme et du Droit*

executions and rape, the ICC only found enough evidence to release a search warrant and eventually prosecute one Ansar Dine leader, Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, for 'intentionally directing attacks against protected objects.'[44] The court case started September 30th 2015 at the ICC-court in The Hague and al-Mahdi was sentenced to nine years of imprisonment at September 27th 2016. This section will analyse the arguments by all parties along the three established tropes, but it will mainly focus on the reasoning by the prosecutor of the ICC, since they represent the international branch of law.

1) <u>The importance of cultural heritage</u>

Fatou Bensouda was the ICC Prosecutor during the Al-Mahdi trial and lay down the ICC's view on the destruction of cultural heritage during armed conflicts. The criminality of these acts was already established by the Rome Statute of 1998, that more specifically classified it as a war crime. During the first official trial day on August 22nd 2016, Bensouda elaborated on the essence of cultural heritage by defending its inherent part of humanity:

> 'To destroy Timbuktu's mausoleums is therefore to erase an element of collective identity built through the ages. It is to eradicate a civilisation's landmark. It is the destruction of the roots of an entire people, which irremediably affects its social attitudes, practices and structures.'[45]

These words resemble the previous remarks by Ban Ki Moon and Bokova of the UN and UNESCO, but at the same time add a more juridical level that is also important for the broader discussion. Describing the destructions as war crime reaffirms the already mentioned use of material heritage as targets of warfare. Gilles Duterte, a lawyer who cooperated with Bensouda, called 'the attack […] planned and premeditated.'[46] However, due to the individualism of the trial case, the attacks are not referred to in a global context. This means that even though the prosecutor is aware of the global resonance of the events, she does not pay attention to the global campaign of the ones destroying it. The same tendency is visible for the other tropes.

2) <u>The specific local context of northern Mali</u>

During the trial, the specific local developments of northern Mali were discussed thoroughly, but completely focussed on the elements that could be used as evidence against al-Mahdi. This meant a

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International Humanitair commises notamment dans la partie Nord du terrioire(…)' and '(…) *déterminer si une ou plusieurs personnes identifiées devraient être accusées des crimes ci-dessus specifies.*'

[44] Press release, 'ICC Prosecutor opens investigation into war crimes in Mali: "The legal requirements have been met. We will investigate' (January 16 2013) https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=pr869&ln=en (Viewed: June 2, 2017)

[45] *The Prosecutor vs. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi*, 22 August 2016, ICC-01/12-01/15-T-4-Red-ENG WT , 19

[46] *The Prosecutor vs. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi*, 22 August 2016, ICC-01/12-01/15-T-4-Red-ENG WT , 51

detailed reconstruction of Ansar Dine's and AQIM's occupation of Timbuktu and the other big cities in northern- Mali as well as al-Mahdi's role as the leader of Hisbah, the morality police. However, the situation before this was barely mentioned. Answering the question what the general circumstances of the crimes were, Duterte answered:

> 'Now, the circumstances are that of a town taken and occupied. It's established that an armed conflict started in January 2012 in north Mali with attacks carried out in Menaka, Aguelhoc and Tessalit. In this context, the armed groups Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb took control of northern Mali in three months. […] During all this period, from April 2012 to January 2013, members of Ansar Dine and AQIM imposed their law and their power on the people of Timbuktu.'[47]

The complex history of northern Mali is reduced to 'an armed conflict that started in January 2012'. It can be logically assumed that the background of the Mali conflict was researched by all individual parties - prosecutor, defence and judges - themselves. However, these developments are so essential in the lead-up to the events in 2012, as previously shown in chapter two, that it clearly creates an omission within the juridical argumentation.

3)   <u>The framing of the suspected Islamic rebel groups (Ansar Dine, MUJAO and AQIM)</u>

The intentions of Ansar Dine, the Islamic rebel group that al-Mahdi aligned himself with mostly, were discussed in length at the trial since they constituted an important part of the prosecutor's argument. Fatou Bensouda's belief, after reviewing many images and movie clips of the destructions and speeches by the rebels, was that the Islamists saw their justification for the destructions in the unholy way the graves and mausoleums were being built, 'a theory according to which one cannot build anything on tombs, and a tomb, according to the religious beliefs, should not be over 1 inch above the ground, and those mausoleums are far higher than that.'[48]

A important distinction arose when the judge clearly pointed out that al-Mahdi before that existence of Ansar Dine never 'had no grudges, had no hatreds, had no ill feelings towards any members of the community.'[49] The transition, according to Mohamed Aouini, the defence lawyer of al-Mahdi, 'leads us to believe that the Al-Qaeda in North Africa had deliberately targeted Mr Al Mahdi and tried to draw him into their ranks.'[50] And even though al-Mahdi accepts his guilt, in this case AQIM is therefore portrayed as a more influencing party that clearly had a broader plan in mind than the local

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[47] *The Prosecutor vs. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi*, 22 August 2016, ICC-01/12-01/15-T-4-Red-ENG WT, 26

[48] *The Prosecutor vs. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi*, 22 August 2016, ICC-01/12-01/15-T-4-Red-ENG WT, 13

[49] *The Prosecutor vs. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi*, 24 August 2016, ICC-01/12-01/15-T-6-Red-ENG WT, 39

[50] *The Prosecutor vs. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi*, 24 August 2016, ICC-01/12-01/15-T-6-Red-ENG WT, 40

party of Ansar Dine. If the destruction, to the extent that they happened in July 2012, were predesigned, can hardly be said. To come to that conclusion, a more thorough analysis of the use of media (al-Mahdi, according to the interviews during the trial, justified his actions at the time by speaking to the media) is needed.

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, the reaction of international politics and law was being analysed. It looked at how the important actors, in this case mostly the UN, UNESCO, and the ICC, reflected on the destructions by dissecting it in three different smaller discourses: the importance of cultural heritage, the local dynamics of the conflict, and the framing of the Islamic rebel groups involved.

What becomes clear is that in both international politics and law the importance of cultural heritage is very big. References to losses of humanity, history and fabrics of identity are made by all parties and resonate to earlier made observations that material cultural heritage can create a sense of belonging, even though it maybe is not your heritage. The urge to protect is clearly strong and can therefore be seen as an affirmation of the 'global propaganda' claim. When the international community is that willing to protect old city centres, and therefore as much enraged at times when it is being destroyed, a (terror) campaign can be called a success.

What does become clear is that in both the cases the long-lasting conflict in the northern of Mali is not properly addressed. By glancing over the animosity with the national army, the resentment from northern communities with the broken promises made by the Bamako government, it takes away an opportunity to nuance the essentialist claims of hate that otherwise are being made. In this way, the attacks are framed as an effect of radical extremism clearly, which make sense, but do not completely correspond with the truth. Some of the communities in the north accepted the authorities of these organisations, because they could not find the same help from national organisations; otherwise, the grassroots of the 2012 rebellion would never have been this strong. To come to a true holistic approach to this conflict, this part of the equation needs to be taken into account as well. The discourse analysis shows a bias towards the framing of the terrorists, which is largely true for AQIM, but Ansar Dine is a more complicated story that for the sake of future prevention of cultural heritage needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

The main question that this thesis tried to answer was: *To which extent is the interpretation of the destruction of Timbuktu in July 2012 by the international community obstructed by a sole focus on Islamic terrorism and how can that be explained?*.

At first, it was important to establish a new interpretative framework that would step away from the focus on prevention and protection when it came to research of heritage destruction. Before the questions of prevention and protection could be asked, it was important to acknowledge that the events of was, in which most destructions take place, have changed. Due to the complex, intra-state nature and the rise of terrorism, the destructions are not only used to attack the identity of sub-communities, but also the global community. Terrorists use this in their 'global propaganda' as another way of enraging the West. However, the international community steps into this trap by only paying attention to the 'terror-aspect' of the destructions instead of diving into the complex background that often precede these events.

Secondly, this paper paid attention to the complex background of the case study. Mali, a former French colony, could roughly be divided into two parts, the northern and southern part. The northern part, being politically economically disadvantaged by the decisions of the national government, which is almost completely ruled by the South, has been rebelling against the Bamako government for decades. The military reaction only aggravated the situation, which led to multiple couple throughout the years. In the 21st century, the increase of international connections to Algeria, Libya and other Islamic nations, together with a huge uprising in 2011 and 2012 led to a new national crisis. Two big Islamic rebel groups, AQIM and Ansar Dine, used this chaos to occupy most of the biggest cities in northern Mali, of which Timbuktu in January 2012 was one of the first.

The international reactions to the destructions that followed were analysed in the last chapter. As it turned out, both international politics as well as law acknowledged the huge impact of cultural heritage on humanity and therefore considered the instructions to be violations of human rights. However, by purely analysing the effects of Islamic terrorism, all analysed organisations (the UN, UNESCO and the ICC) disregarded the complex nature that let to grassroots in which the rebel groups could operate.

So, to come back to the main question, it is hard to pinpoint to a specific extent of obstruction. However, it becomes clear that in both analysed fields, the background story of the Mali conflict was not taken into account properly. For future cases, since this conflict will not be resolved soon, it is important to establish a multi-faceted approach that pays attention to the complicated nature of intra-state conflict. Secondly, it needs to pay attention to the idea of 'global propaganda'. Since most people, due to their Orientalist vision, feel their framework reiterated by seeing these destructions, they do not further investigate. Policy, research, media; all are fields of inquiry where critical analysis is vital to the

understanding of underlying processes. That is why this paper could be enriched by a separate analysis of the reaction by the international media. This could be done in further studies, as well as applying the tropes of the discourse analysis to other case studies.

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