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Conflict and arms

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At last, the destruction of heritage has been recognised as a weapon of war

The imprisonment of Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi for helping to vandalise shrines in Timbuktu marks a key moment for justice and reflects the wider value of culture



▲ Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, who helped to destroy shrines in Timbuktu, at the international criminal court in The Hague. Photograph: Robin van Lonkhuijsen/AFP/Getty Images

In a world scarred by recurrent violence against people and their heritage, the **nine-year prison sentence** handed down to Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, who helped to destroy shrines in Timbuktu, marks a new and welcome recognition that deliberate cultural destruction is a war crime.

Posterity will remember 27 September 2016, the date of Mahdi's conviction by the **international criminal court**, as the day impunity for the destruction of heritage finally came to an end and as a turning point for justice in Mali and beyond.

It is the first international trial to focus exclusively on crimes against historical and religious monuments. Fifteen long years after the blasting of **the Bamiyan Buddhas**, the ICC ruling on the destruction of the mausoleums of Timbuktu passed with the world still reeling over spectacular acts of devastation in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere. Yet the verdict reinforces previous judgments against Balkan warlords by the UN's **international criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia**, which treated crimes against heritage, notably in Dubrovnik, as part of broader charges involving murder and theft.

The outcome of Mahdi's trial is an important contribution towards a comprehensive response to violent extremism, and a strong statement on the role culture should play. The deliberate destruction of heritage has become a weapon of war, part of a broader strategy of cultural cleansing that includes murder and persecution of people in the short term, and the annihilation of identities and destruction of social fabric in the longer term.

Monuments are targeted, damaged or looted to fuel illicit trafficking and finance criminal activities. Schools and media are hijacked. Cultural practices, including music and dance, are banned. Intellectuals are silenced. The aim of this brutal strategy is to enslave minds and prohibit free thinking. Mahdi, head of a morality squad called Hesbah, was a linchpin of this heinous strategy.

This goes beyond Mali: humanity itself is targeted; we are all concerned. The war against extremism must therefore be fought also on the battlefield of culture, education and the media. No military arsenal is strong enough to defeat an ideology that fuels violence.

We must win the battle of ideas. How? By teaching about the history of religions. By fostering dialogue between cultures. By sharing the wealth of knowledge contained in the manuscripts of Timbuktu, which hold the promise of a new humanist renaissance that could change our understanding of Africa and of Islam, strengthening young people's capacity to resist those who exploit ignorance and hatred.

This broader vision of security is gaining ground. In warfare, the destruction of heritage was long considered mere collateral damage. Increasingly, though, culture is recognised as a direct target, part of a strategy intent on disseminating fear and attracting global media coverage.



▲ A still from footage of Islamist militants destroying an ancient shrine in Timbuktu. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

The UN security council has acknowledged the link between culture and security, and the contribution of illicit trafficking to the financing of criminal activities. Member states are seizing dubious objects at their borders, strengthening cooperation among services. Armed forces in France, Italy, the US and Austria are training their soldiers and officers to protect heritage.

This is already the case in Mali, where peacekeepers are working with the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. Change is under way, to better connect the dots between the cultural, humanitarian and military concerns that are so deeply intertwined in current crises.

When I went to Timbuktu in 2012, immediately after the liberation of the city, I promised we would rebuild the mausoleums, and we did. I returned last year to celebrate the completion of this task with the local masons and the imam of the **Djinguereber mosque**. I saw the joy of people reclaiming their heritage, and I am more convinced than ever of the role of culture in healing the wounds of war, and as a building block of sustainable peace.

A decade ago, such opinions might have been considered dangerously naive. But when extremists pay so much attention to the harm communities suffer when heritage is destroyed, they show us how much power culture holds to heal and recover when it is preserved.

Let us act on this understanding - and rise to the unprecedented challenges we face - with stronger programmes and increased resources. We need far closer cooperation at the highest level on education to counter extremism, and far stronger commitment to protect heritage under attack.

While we are appalled by the loss of cultural heritage, we must take heart from the judgment of The Hague, which exhorts us to strengthen our resolve and take action to ensure justice prevails - in Mali and across the world.

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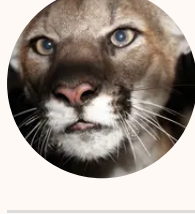
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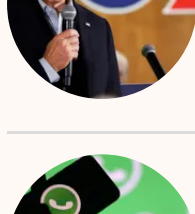
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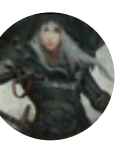
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Just a reminder.

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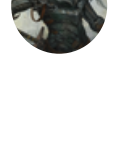


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