

## THE ISLAMIC MANUSCRIPT HERITAGE OF TIMBUKTU

by

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Islam first entered the African continent almost 1400 years ago. The first Muslims to enter Africa were early followers of the Prophet Muhammad who sought refuge in Christian Ethiopia in what is often called "the first *hijra*" in about the year 615 A.D. Just a quarter of a century later many more Muslim Arabs pushed their way into Egypt during the great movement of expansion of the lands of the Caliphate during the caliphate of Umar b. al-Khattab in 640-1. Before the end of the 7th century, the territory of the Caliphate had been extended westwards to the Atlantic Ocean, covering what are now the countries of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Although some exploratory thrusts were made into the Sahara, no actual conquests were made; instead expansion turned northwards across the Mediterranean and into the Iberian peninsula. Over the coming centuries, however, Islam was introduced to some of the nomadic peoples of the Sahara, and some of the black African kingdoms along the borders of the southern Sahara. This was done not through any form of conquest or political dominance, but through the agency of Muslim traders, whose primary objective was to obtain gold which was mined in certain parts of West Africa, largely in the territory that now forms part of the Republic of Mali. By the end of the 11th century a number of African rulers in this region had become Muslims, and the majority of the populace of the Berber tribes of the western Sahara belonged to Islam.

It is said in the chronicles of Timbuktu (written in the 17th century) that the origins of Timbuktu go back to around the year 1100, when some

nomads established a summer camp a few miles away from the river Niger as a base from which they could pasture and water their camels during the hottest weather. Timbuktu's position proved strategic for commerce. This camp site gradually attracted people who settled there and turned it into a permanent dwelling place. It was situated at the junction of the dry Sahara and the lush central valley of the river Niger, a waterway that constituted an easy pathway for transporting goods to and from the more tropical regions of West Africa. Over the early centuries of its existence Timbuktu rapidly attracted settlers, in the form of merchants, and then Muslim scholars, from Saharan oases such as Walata, Touat, Ghadames, and the Fezzan, and from the southern reaches of Morocco. Ghadames traders played an important role in Timbuktu trade from the 15th to the 19th century. Ghadames was a gateway to Tripoli and for routes leading to Egypt. Similarly, Touat was a trade entrepot, with routes radiating out to Fez, Algiers and Tunis in the north, and Gao, Agades, and Katsina in the south.

Timbuktu's importance as a center of commerce is vividly illustrated by its first appearance on a European map in 1375. This was a map drawn for the Catalan ruler Charles V by a Jewish cartographer of Majorca, hinting no doubt at the role played by Jewish merchants in trans-Saharan trade. A quarter of a century earlier Timbuktu had been visited by the extraordinary Muslim traveler from Tangier, Ibn Battūta, who found there the grave of an Andalusian poet, Abū Ishaq Ibrāhīm al-Sahīlī, who had accompanied the ruler of Mali, Mansa Müsa upon his return from the *hajj* in 1325. Timbuktu at that time was part of the great medieval empire of Mali, and it was this ruler, Mansa Musa, who ordered the construction of the Great Mosque - Jingere Ber - and the Andalusian al-Sahili, who oversaw the actual construction.

The building of a great congregational mosque clearly established Timbuktu as an Islamic city, and over the next two centuries many Muslim scholars were attracted to settle in it, so that by the mid-15th century Timbuktu had become a major center of Islamic teaching.

Many of the scholars settled in the north-eastern quarter of the city, called Sankore, where another large mosque was built and named after the quarter. The Sankore mosque was also a location for teaching Islamic texts, though individual scholars also taught their students in, or near, their own homes. It was in these homes of scholars that the establishment of libraries took place. Some of these personal libraries were evidently quite large. Timbuktu's most celebrated scholar, Ahmad Baba (1564-1627) claimed that his library contained 1,600 volumes, and that it was the smallest library of any of his family - the Aqit, being the leading scholarly family that had provided the city with *qadis* throughout the 16th century. Ahmad Baba was, of course, part of the Timbuktu teaching tradition. His primary shaykh was a certain Muhammad Baghayogho, a Mande Dyula scholar who migrated to Timbuktu from Jenne. To give you an idea of the teaching tradition, let me quote part of a biography of Muhammad Baghayogho, recorded by his pupil Ahmad Baba in his famous biographical dictionary *Nayl al-ibtihaj* (a supplement to Ibn Farhūn's dictionary of Maliki scholars *al-Dibaj al-mudhahhab*):

**"Our shaykh and our [source of] blessing, the jurist, and accomplished scholar, a pious and ascetic man of God, who was among the finest of God's righteous servants and practising scholars. He was a man given by nature to goodness and benign intent, guileless, and naturally disposed to goodness, believing in people to such an extent that all men were virtually equal in his sight, so well did he think of them and absolve them of wrongdoing.**

Moreover, he was constantly attending to people's needs, even at cost to himself, becoming distressed at their misfortunes, mediating their disputes, and giving counsel.

Add to this his love of learning, and his devotion to teaching—in which pursuit he spent his days—his close association (*bu ba*) with men of learning, and his own utter humility, his lending of his most rare and precious books in all fields without asking for them back again, no matter what discipline they were in. Thus it was that he lost a [large] portion of his books—may God shower His beneficence upon him for that! Sometimes a student would come to his door asking for a book, and he would give it to him without even knowing who the student was. In this matter he was truly astonishing, doing this for the sake of God Most High, despite his love for books and [his zeal in] acquiring them, whether by purchase or copying. One day I came to him asking for books on grammar, and he hunted through his library and brought me everything he could find on the subject.

It is clear from this that the man himself possessed a considerable library, to which any aspiring scholar could have access. What kind of books would such a library have contained? First and foremost, it would have contained the texts that were to be taught to his students: commentaries on the Qur'an, books of *hadith*, theological treatises in the Sunni Ashfari tradition, and works of Maliki jurisprudence (*fiqh*), such as the *Muwatta* of Malik b. Anas, the *Mudawwana* of Sahnun, the *Risala* of Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani, and the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil b. Ishaq, with some of its many commentaries, and works on Arabic grammar such as the *Alfiyya* of Ibn Malik and the *Mulakat al-ifirab* of al-Hariri. But Timbuktu scholarship went beyond the teaching of basic texts. We know, for example that Ahmad Baba had access to the great

History of Ibn Khaldun (*K. al-ibar*), a work which he quotes from in one of his writings. In the same work he also quotes passages from al-Suyuti's *Rahshahn al-Hubshan*, a less than commonly circulating work.

Indeed, there was clearly an important trade in books in 16th century Timbuktu. This is clear from the account of Leo Africanus (al-Hasan b. Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Zayyati), who visited Timbuktu in the early years of that century and observed, "Many manuscript books coming from Barbary are sold. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods". Not only were manuscripts imported to Timbuktu, both from North Africa and Egypt, but scholars going on pilgrimage studied in both Mecca and, on the way back, in Cairo, and often copied texts to add to their own libraries. There was also an active copying industry in Timbuktu itself. One amazing piece of evidence for this is a work that the scholar Ahmad b. Anda Ag-Muhammad had copied for himself in the late 16th century.

The work I refer to is an Arabic dictionary, the *Muhkam* of the Andalusian scholar Ibn Sidah (d. 1066) and the copying of the full work, running to twenty-eight volumes, was completed in April 1574. What is interesting about these volumes - four of which I examined in Morocco some thirty-four years ago - is that their colophons throw some light on the copying industry of 16th-century Timbuktu, thus confirming the interest in book collection and library building. The colophons name the copyists, the person for whom they were copied, and who provided the blank paper for them, the dates of beginning and ending the copying of each volume, and the amount paid to the copyists. The colophons, in essence, constitute a labor contract. Two of the (double) volumes contain a second colophon, in which another person records that he verified the accuracy of the copying, and

records what he was paid. The copyist received 1 m<sup>q</sup>. of gold (4.238 gr./0.15 [ 3/20] oz) per volume, and the verifier half that amount.

It would appear, from the evidence provided in these various colophons, that manuscript copying was, truly, a professionalized business. Compensation was paid by legal contract, and it would seem that both the copyist and the verifier (himself also a professional copyist) worked full time to complete their contracted tasks; the copyist was copying some 7.5 ff or 142 lines of text per day, while the verifier was going through the material at the rate of 9 ff or 171 lines of text per day.

We know less about whether or not there were public libraries in 16th century Timbuktu. One of the rulers of the Songhay empire, which incorporated Timbuktu within it in 1468, Askiya *al-hajj* Muhammad b. Abi Bakr (1493-1528) made an endowment of 60 *juz* [equivalent to two complete copies] of the Qur'an to the Great Mosque of Timbuktu, and it is said that a later ruler, Askiya Dawud (1549-1583), set up public libraries in his state, though no trace of them has ever been discovered.

What has survived, however, is the private collection [or parts of it] of one of the two great chroniclers of Timbuktu, Mahmud Kati, now looked after by one of his descendants in Timbuktu, who re-assembled it from various branches of the Kati family who had inherited it over generations. I was privileged to see a number of items from this library when I was in Timbuktu in August 1999. I was truly amazed to see that the copying of some of these manuscripts went back to the 16th, and even in some cases, the 15th century. For example, I saw a beautiful copy of the Qur'an in a fine eastern script with a copying date equivalent to 1420 (823 AH). The final page was, in fact, written in Turkish, and recorded the fact that the copy had been dedicated as a waqf in the name of a woman named as Sharifa Khadija

Khanum. How this manuscript got to Timbuktu we do not know. Perhaps it was purchased by Mahmud Kati, or some member of his family whilst on pilgrimage.

Another very old and very beautiful manuscript is a copy of the *Kitab al-Shif' bi-ta'rif huquq al-Mustafa* by the 11th-century Moroccan scholar, *Qadi* Iyad. Although we do not know the date of copying, a note at the end of volume 1 tells us that it was purchased in 1468. What is truly surprising is that it was purchased in a Saharan oasis by a man migrating from Toledo in Spain to "the land of the Blacks" (*bilad al-sudan*), hoping to find repose there. The note reads as follows:

**I bought this illuminated book called *al-Shifa'* by the *Qadi* Iyad from its first owner Muhammad b. Umar in a [legally] valid sale, for the sum of 45 *mithqals* of gold in cash [about 3.5 oz] paid in its entirety to the one from whom it was purchased with the witness of our companions. This took place two months after our arrival in Tuwat coming from our city of Toledo, capital of the Goths. And we are now on our way to the land of the *bilad al-sudan*, asking of God Most High that He should grant us repose there.**

**I, the servant of his Lord Ali b. Ziyad al-Quti, wrote[this] in Muharram of the year 873 of the Prophetic *hijra*. [July-August 1468]**

The writer of the note, and purchaser of the manuscript, turns out to be the grandfather of Mahmud Kati, so evidently the male ancestry of the family was from central Spain, and appears to claim Visigoth origins. However they settled in West Africa and married locally, since Mahmud Kati himself uses a *nisba* (ethnic label) that relates him to the Soninke

people [Wafikuri], and it is possible that he was related to the ruling dynasty, the Askiyas, of the Songhay empire, whose male ancestry was also Soninke.

Another very fascinating item in the collection is prized not for its physical beauty or its content, but for the notes written in the margins. The identity of the book is not known as it lacks its opening folios. All we can say is that it is a devotional work seeking God's mercy by invoking the names of the four great imams, founders of the *madh'habs* of jurisprudence and some other great figures. But Mahmud Kati used the manuscript's wide margins, not to comment on the text, but to record certain local events; it is as if it were his journal. Why he used the manuscript for this purpose we do not know, but it may be that because the price of paper in 16th-century Timbuktu was high (it was mainly imported from Europe), he just decided to use the blank space to record fragments of history. It is not uncommon for owners of manuscripts to record notes on the title page of a manuscript, just as American Christians used to use the first blank page of a copy of the Bible to record family matters.

His marginal notes record a wide variety of events, most of which would otherwise be unknown to us. Here are some examples:

**In that year God caused prices to fall, rains were abundant, and wells filled up. As soon as rain began to fall, people began to plant, and God facilitated harvesting of the crop. He sent successive rains to His servants following the year 910 [1504-5], and people continued thus for five years.**

Here, then, is a remarkable piece of climatological data, that no other known source gives us. Another cosmological event is recorded towards the end of the century:

**In the year 991 [1583] in God's month of Rajab the Goodly [August 1583] after half the night had passed, stars flew around the sky as if fire had been kindled in the whole sky - east, west, north and south. It became a mighty flame lighting up the earth, and people were extremely disturbed about that. It continued until after dawn.**

**Recorded by the humble servant of his Lord, Alfafi Kati Mahmud b. Al b. al-Mutawakkil bi'llah b. Ziyad al-Qutial-Wafiqari in the year 991 [1583].**

Here again is a unique piece of information - as I would interpret it, a meteor shower - that is of a nature that would not lead it to be included in a chronicle [It is certainly not in Mahmud Kati's chronicle]. Chronicles generally deal mainly, if not exclusively, with political events.

Other events recorded in these margins include a wedding, the death of a scholar, and brief statements of some of Mahmud Kati's journeys in the area. There are many more pages with marginal notes in this manuscript, but I did not have time to examine or photograph more than a very few. It is our hope that the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), which we set up at Northwestern University last year, will be able to fund the taking of many more images (photographic or digital) and to sponsor seminars of interpretation that would include Timbuktu scholars and other international specialists. We hope, too, to be able to help the curator of the collection, Ismael Diadié Haidara, to have the collection scientifically

preserved, and a special building constructed to house the 3,000 manuscripts that make up the full collection. Already I have signed a contract with the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation in London, to catalog the collection, and they will publish it entirely in Arabic.

The Kati library, however, is not the only valuable library in Timbuktu. A collection of 5,000 Arabic manuscripts was inherited by fiAbd al-Qadir Haidara from his father, and that has now been housed in a new library building funded by an American foundation through Harvard University [ see " Wonders of the African World", TV program hosted by Henry Lewis Gates Jr.], and the Al-Furqan Foundation has already published a catalog of it. There are, in fact, some twenty private manuscript libraries in Timbuktu, and approximately one hundred in the sixth region of Mali.

The largest collection of Arabic manuscripts, however, is a public one in Timbuktu at the Ahmad Baba Center for Documentation and Historical Research, generally known by its abbreviated French title as CEDRAB. The origins of that center go back to a meeting that I was privileged to attend in 1967. When UNESCO was beginning to plan its multi-volume history of Africa, it convened a "Meeting of Experts" in Timbuktu to examine the range of Arabic sources for African history. At the conclusion of the meeting, chaired by Najm al-Din Bammate [a UNESCO official of Afghan origin], a resolution was passed calling on the government of Mali to establish a center for the preservation of Arabic manuscripts in Timbuktu. Some years later, after funding had been raised [principally from Kuwait] the center was built and soon manuscripts were being obtained, either by gift or purchase, from private libraries in Timbuktu. It developed and expanded considerably after the appointment in the late 1970s of Dr Mahmud Zouber, who directed CEDRAB for some 15 years until he was made ambassador of

Mali to Saudi Arabia, and in 1999 counsellor to the president of Mali on religious affairs.

CEDRAB now contains close to 20,000 manuscripts, ranging from single-page archival documents to large scholarly tomes. A handlist of the first 9,000 items has been published by the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, London.

The great majority of the items preserved at the Centre Ahmad Baba are of local authorship, though some non-local items have been acquired if they have some historical or aesthetic interest. Among the latter we may note a beautiful illuminated copy of the *Shifa'* of *Qadi* Iyad penned in Morocco (no. 3178) and one volume (in 80ff.) of the *Wafayat al-afiyān* of Ibn Khallikan in the hand of Ahmad Baba, copied by him in Marrakesh in Jumada I 1008/19 Nov.-18 Dec. 1599 (no. 3866). Almost all the items are in the Arabic language, though the index does record the existence of a letter in Tamacheq and several poems and letters in the Songhay language—the only examples of this language written in the Arabic script so far preserved to the best of my knowledge.

It is difficult to do justice to the richness of the collection in a brief talk such as this, but it may be worthwhile to indicate some of the principal categories of materials and to give illustrative examples of some of them. There are two broad categories of material; (1) items of a 'literary' character—religious treatises, chronicles, poems, all of which (or most of which) may be attributed to an author, and (2) items of a documentary character, including letters, and commercial and legal documents. Between these two categories come a large number of items that are in one sense documents and in another sense—in that they are written by scholarly authors—works belonging to a literary tradition. These are the *fatwas*—both

individual ones on specific topics and collected volumes—and *risalas* and *ajwiba* [ "replies" ] , often on quite specific topics but addressed to particular individuals or groups. There are a dozen or so major collections of *fatwas* at CEDRAB, totalling over 1,800 ff. Some of these are collections of the legal opinions of a particular scholar whilst others are more diverse collections of opinions of the scholars of the region as a whole. Most of the collections by single individuals are, in fact, by scholars of Mauritanian origin, though the major one is by the late 19th-early 20th century Kunta scholar Shaykh Bay b. Sidi Umar al-Kunti (1865 - 1920+) which runs to some 488 ff. in nine volumes (nos. 118-126). There are three copies of the major collection of the *fatwas* of the scholars of ‘Takrür’—*al-Amal al-mashkur fi jam' nawazil ulama' al-Takrur* by al-Mustafa b. Ahmad al-Ghallawi (nos. 521, 1031 & 5346).

As a matter of interest, let me give you a short list of some of the topics dealt with in these *fatwas* and *responsa* mainly dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries:

- i) On dwelling with the Christians
- ii) On lost camels
- iii) On ritual purity.
- iv) On a wife’s rejection of her husband’s authority (*nushüz*).
- v) On whether is it permissible to eat with a man who fails to perform *wuḍū* without valid reason.
- vi) On a slave who committed a crime against a free boy.

- vii) On the purchasing of plundered goods.
- viii) On division of inheritance.
- ix) On cutting down trees in order to feed goats.
- x) On a man and woman who befriended one another, claiming that they were related through milk kinship.
- xi) On a married couple who were told after many years of marriage that they are related through milk kinship.
- xii) On a man who married a woman without anyone telling him she was within the prohibited degrees of marriage.
- xiii) On the failure of women to observe *hijab*.

These and other *fatwas* will eventually help us to better understand the nature of social and economic issues in the Timbuktu region in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and how Islamic law regulated them.

As regards purely religious issues, there is relatively little writing, since all the Muslims of the Timbuktu region are Ash'ari Sunnis and adherents of the Maliki madh'hab. The one exception is the conflictual literature over Sufism. Prior to the 19th century the only Sufi *tariqa* in the region was the Qadiriyya. By the middle of the 19th century the new Tijaniyya *tariqa* [following the teachings of Ahmad al-Tijani, who died in Morocco in 1815] had been introduced into the broader region, and gained adherents. The two *tariqas* became rivals, especially since they were also associated with political leaders. Some also rallied against Ahmad al-Tijani's spiritual

claims, and his assertion of the uniqueness of his *tariqa*, and his refusal to allow his followers to have any association with any other Sufi shaykh.

To conclude, let me just introduce you to projects I am involved in to perpetuate the Timbuktu library legacy, and to make the city's intellectual heritage more widely accessible. The first of these, which I initiated a decade ago, is called "Arabic Literature of Africa", or ALA for short. The object of it is to produce a series of published volumes - a total of about eight - as a guide to the Muslim writers of sub-Saharan Africa and their writings, principally in Arabic, as the title suggests, but also including anything they also wrote in African languages that were, before the 20th century, written using the Arabic script. Writers are grouped together according to their relationships to one another; family, ethnic group, city, Sufi *tariqa*, etc. Each author is presented through a brief biography; then his/her works are listed alphabetically, with indications of where manuscript copies are to be found. Hence, a researcher will eventually be able to trace any work written in Arabic in sub-Saharan [and Saharan] Africa. So far two volumes have been published in English, and will soon be republished in Arabic. The first deals with the Sudan down to 1900, and was prepared by my colleague Professor Sean O'Fahey of the University of Bergen [Norway]. The second, which I prepared, covers Nigeria and Chad. Currently, I am preparing volume 4, which should appear later this year and will run to some 800 pages. It covers the Timbuktu tradition and the rest of Mali, as well as Senegal, Guinea, Niger and Ghana. Professor O'Fahey is preparing volume 3 covering Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and the Swahili coast of East Africa [and in this he lists writings in Swahili as well as Arabic. Soon we shall begin work on the Sudan in the 20th century, and later I will work with other colleagues to produce a volume on Mauritania.

The other project, which I am also carrying out jointly with Professor O'Fahey (who spends half of each academic year at Northwestern) is the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), which we inaugurated in January 2000. The principle objectives of ISITA are:

1. To preserve, and disseminate information on, African Arabic manuscript libraries.
2. To establish networks of collaboration between African, American, and European scholars working on the Islamic intellectual tradition in Africa.
3. To bring scholars together to discuss multiple aspects of Islamic Thought in Africa through workshops, colloquia and conferences.
4. To promote the publication of collective volumes of studies arising from scholarly meetings, and essential works of reference relating to the Islamic intellectual tradition in Africa.

As regards our first objective, our primary concentration will be on the libraries of Timbuktu. We intend to help library owners to preserve their manuscripts scientifically, and to digitize them so that the contents of the library can be more widely available, and accessible to researchers without actually having to handle the manuscripts themselves. At the same time we shall produce computerized catalogues of the contents of the libraries to facilitate research. We also intend to hold international seminars at Northwestern to bring together scholars to analyze, and in some cases to translate, some of the more significant manuscripts, especially those of historical interest. Later we hope to do similar things for libraries in Nigeria, the Sudan, Zanzibar and other African countries.

ISITA has already had some senior African fellows in residence, and in May we held an international colloquium on the year's theme : " Libraries and the transmission of Islamic knowledge in Africa. Next academic year [beginning this Fall] we shall have both senior fellows and, in Spring 2002, junior African fellows to work on the theme: "Muslim commentaries on the State", with special emphasis on the responses of African Muslims to the colonial state.

We hope that this institute will be a permanent feature of Northwestern's intellectual life, and that Islamic thought (beginning with Africa) will become an integral part of our teaching curriculum. We hope, too, to enlighten the general public as to the role that Islam has played in African societies, and to the fact that much of Africa has enjoyed literacy and an intellectual life - matters that may help to erase some of the unfortunate stereotypes about Africa that have been current, and in many cases exacerbated by racist thinking. Timbuktu will cease to be seen just as a legendary fantasy, and will be recognized for what it really was - a spiritual and intellectual jewel inspired by the Islamic faith.