

Goths in the Lands of the Blacks

New Arabic manuscript finds from Timbuktu and their significance for the historiography of the Niger Bend

Albrecht Hofheinz

A decade ago, in 1991, I was sitting in a Moorish café in Granada, in southern Spain. The café was styled to recall the atmosphere of the times when Islam reigned in al-Andalus, the name the Arabs gave to the Iberian Peninsula. Muslim rule there lasted almost eight centuries, from 711 to 1492, and during this time al-Andalus was a leading cultural and intellectual center important not only within the Muslim world, but for the development of Christian and Jewish thought in Europe as well. The name 'al-Andalus' still evokes the idea of a cultural apogee, of the refinement of arts at princely courts such as the Alhambra, of enchanting gardens recreating oases in the middle of city walls, of the flourishing of love poetry, of the sophistication of Islamic mystical thought, of religious tolerance and the bringing together of the best minds of mankind, not to speak of such mundane things as the introduction of new agricultural produce, the improvement of cultivation methods, or the sanitation of cities. True, al-Andalus is a 'paradise lost', and the image it conjures may not contain all the elements that made up Muslim Spain. But this is not what matters here. Al-Andalus remains not only a part of Muslims' heritage to be proud of, but also a model to measure oneself against and aspire to.

As I was sitting in this Moorish café in Granada, the last capital of al-Andalus, sipping my tea and trying to decipher the Arabic poetry decorating the walls, I noticed a tall, slim African man with fine features sitting in a corner next to me. We struck up a conversation, and he told me that he came from Timbuktu, in Mali in West Africa, and was studying here in Spain. 'Why Spain?', I wanted to know. 'Well,' he said, 'my ancestors are from here. They were Spanish Muslims forced to leave their home country when Christian rulers moved further and further south, ever more squeezing the sovereign Muslim territories until the final fall of Granada in 1492. Like hundreds of thousands of others, my ancestors crossed the Straits of Gibraltar to seek refuge on the other side. Unlike most, however, they didn't stay on the Mediterranean's southern shore. They moved on across the Sahara to the Niger Bend, to Timbuktu where they settled and married and had children and became important officials of state and ... well, I am one of their offspring.'

I looked at him in amazement and, I must admit, all but disbelief. Stories of wise strangers coming from far away lands to settle among the natives, marrying the king's daughter and introducing a new religion and new material or cultural techniques are among the stock repertoire of African (and not only African) historical traditions, and modern historians generally do good not to take them all too literally. And from my studies of Sudanese history I was very familiar with imagined genealogies 'invented' to establish and maintain social or political claims. Most Northern Sudanese today, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, sport pedigrees that make them descendants of ʿAbbās, the uncle of the Prophet. These genealogies can be demonstrated to be products of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the Islamic identity of the leading classes and then of the majority of the population in the Nilotic Sudan became much more pronounced. Sometimes these newly established family trees were poorly made, it must be said. Thus, for example, I have analyzed in depth the pedigree of the Sudan's most important Sufi leaders, the Mīrghanī family, who base their claim to prominence largely on their Sharīfī status, that is, their descent from the Prophet. Proof of this, they say, is a written pedigree found in a chest in al-Ṭāʾif, the summer resort of Mecca, and copied by the famous eighteenth-century polymath al-Zabīdī. Whatever al-Zabīdī copied, he didn't study it too well, for it linked the Mīrghanīs to the Prophet through the twelve Shīʿī imāms, the last of whom, as is well known, disappeared at a young age without leaving any offspring.

So the 'historicity' of such presumed ancestors must often be questioned, and the accounts should rather be analyzed for their 'ideological' content. I was therefore much inclined to view the story of my Malian friend as an attempt to link up to the glory of al-Andalus, perhaps somehow mediated through the Moroccan expedition that conquered Timbuktu and the Niger Bend in 1591. But 'no', he assured me, 'we came there long before the Moroccans, and I am preparing to write a history of the Spanish emigrants to Timbuktu.'

I took his card and stuck it away and returned to my Sudanese studies and forgot all about him. Timbuktu has long had its own mystique as a fabled city of riches at the far end of the world, but I had read enough to know that the streets there were not paved with gold as so many an explorer's imagination would have it.

Then, one day in September 1999, I was on a nostalgia visit to Bergen where my own imagination has ample sources to feed upon. The visit was timed to meet up with John Hunwick who had then just come back from his latest visit to Timbuktu. my friend John Hunwick, the leading specialist of West African Islamic history, came back from Timbuktu. With him he brought a handful of photographs of Ara-

bic manuscripts from a newly unearthed collection there which he was very excited about. One of the images he showed me was taken from a beautifully decorated copy of the *Kitāb al-Shifāʾ bi-taʿrīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā*, a much read work of pious veneration of the Prophet composed by the twelfth-century Moroccan author al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ. One of the pages carried the following note:

“I bought this illuminated book called *al-Shifāʾ* by Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ from its previous owner Muḥammad b. ʿUmar in a [legally] correct sale, for the sum of 45 mḡ of pure gold [= roughly 1.5 oz], paid in its entirety to the one from whom it was purchased, as witnessed by our companions. This took place two months after our arrival in Tuwāt [a group of oases in the present-day Algerian Sahara], coming from our city (*bilād*) of Toledo, capital of the Goths, on our way to the land of the blacks (*bilād al-Sūdān*), asking of God Most High that He should grant us repose there. Written by the servant of his Lord ʿAlī b. Ziyād the Goth (*al-Qūṭī*) in the month of Muḥarram of the year 873 of the Prophetic hijra [July / August 1468].”

This was quite something! A documentary trace of a Spanish Muslim emigrating from his home country to West Africa in 1468, a quarter century before the fall of Granada, and much earlier than the Moroccan expedition to Timbuktu of 1591. And it was not a man who had fled from Christian armies advancing into Muslim territory. It was a man who came from Toledo, capital of the kingdom of Castile in Central Spain since it had fallen to the Christians in the eleventh century. This was a Spanish Muslim from a family that had lived under Christian rule for almost four hundred years. And it was a man who identified himself as a “Goth”, along with the people of his country. These “Goths” (*al-Qūṭ*, in Arabic) are known in English as the ‘Visigoths’, which just means the ‘Western Goths’. They were a section of the Gothic peoples who originated in southern Scandinavia and spread over much of Europe causing the downfall of the Roman Empire, together with other migrant peoples, chiefly of Germanic extraction. The Visigoths even moved into North Africa where they reached as far as modern Tunisia. They were the rulers of Spain before being overthrown by the Muslims in 711. So our friend ʿAlī b. Ziyād the Goth identified himself as someone whose ‘ethnic’ identity, if you will, was not Arab or Berber such as those who had crossed over from North Africa to conquer the Iberian Peninsula for Islam, but as someone whose roots on the Peninsula were much deeper, whose people were the ‘original’, so to speak, rulers of Spain. He was clearly a good Muslim who at some point in his life decided that conditions under Christian rule had become so intolerable that he chose to sacrifice his home for his faith. He also spent a good sum of money on a pious book. But he was not an Arab. He was, in modern terms, a Spanish Muslim.

I suddenly remembered the story of my Malian acquaintance from that Moorish café which for a decade I had completely forgotten. Maybe it was indeed not only an imagined ancestry that this guy from Timbuktu had been talking about?

The manuscript on which this amazing fact was recorded belonged to a collection of several thousand items that had been rediscovered in 1999 by Dr. Ismael Diadié Haïdara, a young Malian scholar, in the houses of several branches of his family scattered over different villages around Timbuktu. Ismael, it turned out, was non other than my friend from Granada. He had studied in Spain where he still spends part of the year, and had presented several publications on Spanish-African themes since I met him.¹

The collection that Ismael had unearthed turned out to go back to the first historian of the area. It grew around the personal library of Maḥmūd Kaʿti who lived in the sixteenth century and is known as the author – or perhaps rather, the first author – of the famed *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*, or *The Searcher's Chronicle*, which is the first extant written history of the empires of Mali and Songhay. These empires dominated the Niger Bend between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Following Maḥmūd Kaʿti, his descendants added on to the library until the nineteenth century. Ismael found the manuscripts buried in desk drawers, closets, and under beds in the houses of various branches of his extended family. They were often in a very fragile condition, and in an effort to salvage them, Ismael began to move them to his own house in Timbuktu where he showed a small sample to John Hunwick in August 1999.

This sample was enough to convince John to state that this “may be dubbed ‘the find of the century’ in terms of African history” (ISITA proposal). To all appearance, what had come to light was the oldest preserved Arabic library ever discovered south of the Sahara. John being prevented from returning to Timbuktu, he asked me if I would go and make a more thorough survey of the collection. Given such a find, how could I resist? I went to Timbuktu in October last year, and with the help of two young Malian scholars was able to go through a sizeable part of the collection and prepare a provisional hand-list of about 20% of it.

Timbuktu and the area of Timbuktu are not exactly poor in libraries and manuscript collections. In fact, it is estimated that in northern Mali there are at least

¹ *Jawdar Pasha et la conquête saâdienne du Songhay, 1591-1599*, Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 1996 (Publications de l'Institut des Études Africaines – Rabat. Série: Études; 1); *L'Espagne musulmane et l'Afrique subsaharienne*, Bamako: Éditions Donniya, 1997; *Les juifs à Tombouctou: recueil des sources écrites relatives au commerce juif à Tombouctou au XIXe siècle*, Bamako: Éditions Donniya, 1999.

100,000 manuscripts held in various public and private collections, and maybe considerably more. In Timbuktu alone there are at least 32 private libraries of varying size, the largest of which – the Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library of Abdel Kader Haïdara – contains about 5000 manuscripts. The public collection at the Institut Ahmed Baba (formerly, Centre Ahmed Baba) which was established in 1972 meanwhile holds 15,000 manuscripts. This is an extremely rich and important heritage for Africa, for the Muslim world, and I would say for humankind. Let me briefly explain how it came about.

[historical overview / blackboard or map: Middle Niger (“Niger Bend”) area. Niger Inland delta. Agriculture & fishing. Trade gold – salt. Several routes West (Bambouk & Bakoy through Walāta in modern Mauritania to Morocco) and East (Akan through Djenné, Timbuktu where exchanged for salt from Taghāza and later Taoudénni, on to Morocco). Empires formed to control this exchange. Most important: Ghana (7th-13th c.), followed by Mali (13th-15th c.) which has been called “the greatest geopolitical formation in the history of West Africa” (Saad, 24). In part due to political disruptions, the Western routes lost in importance to the Eastern ones around 1200, which brought about a shift of power and prosperity towards the more easterly lands. The town of Djenné at the southern end of the Niger Inland Delta became an important emporium for the gold-salt trade. The trade made cities flourish, and in these cities learned men settled whose expertise was needed for purposes demanding the skill of writing, and demanding legal skills: such as drawing up business contracts, providing notary services, writing business letters and other letters, settling disputes over contracts or property boundaries, settling inheritance issues, concluding marriage contracts – all these kinds of things. And these men were also active in other domains, functioning as religious teachers and leaders and providing medical services. They were the carriers of written culture in these lands, the intellectuals, so to speak. They were the educators of the people in the teachings of Islam and specialists in the sciences transmitted in the medium of the Arabic language, which include not only religious beliefs and practices, Qur’ānic studies, and Prophetic Traditions, but most importantly the Law, and then also other sciences such as grammar, mathematics, medicine, dream interpretation, astronomy, history, philosophy and mysticism, not to forget poetry.

The history of the introduction and the spread of Islam in West Africa is still rather sketchy. But it is reasonably clear that it benefited from its association with the skills of writing and the sciences transmitted through writing which were cultural assets not known in the area before. Association with Islam also meant association with the network of traders dominated by Muslim traders from North Africa. Many West African cities at the time consisted of the royal court, the residential

quarters of the local population, and a “traders’ quarter” which was physically set apart from the rest of town. The traders were Muslims, and they had mosque and the market for long-distance trade was in their quarter. In many cases, local allegiance to Islam at first was limited to the king and possibly his court, and it took centuries for the majority of the population in what is now the southern part of Mali to convert to Islam and identify with Islam.

In the northern half of Mali the picture is slightly different. This area is desert and semi-desert, and the people who live here are nomads or migrant herders of Berber and Arab descent. The Tuareg and the Moors are the most famous among them. These people were Islamized much earlier, following the Muslim conquest of North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries. One of the earliest centers of Islamic learning in West Africa was Walāta, in the old kingdom of Ghana, but following the shift of trade, Djenné in Niger Inland Delta became an important center after 1200. We know the names of a few scholars from the Djenné area, but because of the humid climate there which makes paper disintegrate quickly, no manuscript text has come down to us from that time in Djenné.

During the fifteenth century, Timbuktu rose to prominence and eclipsed Djenné as the most important center of Islamic learning in the Middle Niger region. Timbuktu is strategically located at the northern end of the Niger Inland Delta where the river turns its course; it lies at the meeting point between the fertile Niger Delta and the Saharan desert, and it was in Timbuktu that the major trade routes joined linking the Niger region not only north to Morocco but also east to Libya and Egypt and on to Mecca and Arabia. The precise reasons why Timbuktu came to eclipse Djenné are not yet completely clear, but in any case Djenné scholars migrated to Timbuktu and trained new students there who came to be the torchbearers of intellectual life in the Middle Niger region until the eighteenth century.

Timbuktu’s heyday, however, was in the late fifteenth and in the sixteenth centuries, partly coinciding with the apogee of the Songhay Empire that had replaced Mali as the dominant power in the area following the eastward shift of trade. The position of Timbuktu became so important that the early sixteenth-century Moroccan traveler al-Ḥasan b. al-Wazzān (known as Leo Africanus) believed it to be the capital of the empire. This was not quite correct; the political capital was at Gao, some 230 miles to the east. The Songhay ruler Soni ʿAlī had conquered Timbuktu in 1468 – the same year our Spanish Muslim friend ʿAlī the Goth bought his copy of the *Shifāʾ* up in Tuwāt. Soni ʿAlī violently tried to subjugate the scholars of Timbuktu who previously had enjoyed a large measure of autonomy under the loose rule of the Tuareg. His successor, however, Askiya Muḥammad (r. 1493-1529),

restored that autonomy and also granted material favors to the Timbuktu scholarly community. A later ruler, Askiya Dāwūd (r. 1549-82) was also very favorably disposed towards the Timbuktu scholars. There is good reason to argue that it was the combination of ‘public’ support, if you will, and internal autonomy that allowed Timbuktu to become a ‘university town’, if you allow me to use modern analogies. Some 150 schools were counted in Timbuktu in the sixteenth century. The most famous one was at the Sankoré mosque, led by the Timbuktu judges of the Aqīt family; it is sometimes called the ‘Sankoré university’. These scholarly activities attracted a trade of their own. Leo Africanus “noted that many manuscript books coming from North Africa were sold there and that the trade in books was the most profitable business in the city” (Hunwick, NUFU application). Soon, Timbuktu scribes began to copy books brought from Morocco and Egypt, and the scholars started to compose works of their own.

Among the very earliest of the known scholars of the Niger Bend was Maḥmūd Kaʿti – the one whose library was unearthed by Ismael Diadié two years ago. This alone would make this find spectacular, all the more so as the life and origin, indeed the very identity of this first historian of the region have so far remained largely obscure. The original text of *The Searcher’s Chronicle* is not yet established; it has only been published in a version pieced together from three different manuscripts that were partly added to in the seventeenth century and the text of one of which was modified in the nineteenth century for political ends. It is not completely clear what role the early sixteenth-century Maḥmūd Kaʿti played in the history of the text; indeed, one researcher – Nehemia Levtzion – suggested 30 years ago that he did not even exist but was invented by the author of the nineteenth-century forgery.² So the rediscovery of Maḥmūd Kaʿti’s library holds the promise of providing material to help us clear up this muddle. It already seems clear from what has come to light so far that the early sixteenth-century Maḥmūd Kaʿti was not an invention, and that he was a son of that Spanish Muslim, ʿAlī the Goth, who after passing through the Algerian oasis of Tuwāt went on to spend a year in another oasis, in Sijilmāsa in southeastern Morocco. From there he went on pilgrimage to Mecca, returning to Tuwāt and Sijilmāsa for half a year before moving on southwards and finally establishing himself in Goumbou, where the Sahara gives way to the greener Sahel belt. In Goumbou he married a woman from the Sila, a leading clan of the Soninké people, the rulers of ancient Ghana. Of this woman was

² Nehemia Levtzion: “A seventeenth-century chronicle by Ibn al-Mukhtār: a critical study of *Taʾriḫ al-Fattāsh*”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 34 (1971), 3, pp. 571-93; idem, “Maḥmūd Kaʿti, fut-il l’auteur du *Taʾriḫ al-fattāsh*”, *Bulletin de l’Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire*, 33 (1974), pp. 665-74.

born his son Maḥmūd, later to attain fame as Alfa^c Ka^cti Maḥmūd, the historian. Maḥmūd, son of ʿAlī the Goth, may thus have been related on his mother's side to the person who was to become ruler of the Songhay Empire, Askiya Muḥammad, who was also a Sila according to common accounts. This may explain in part why the son of a Spanish immigrant seems to have been so close to the Songhay ruler.

Apart from these hitherto unknown details on the life of the first historian of the Niger Bend, what adds to the significance of the Ka^cti find is that no other library from this age and region has come down to us as a collection, allowing us to study 'first-hand' the sources of intellectual formation that shaped the minds of scholars at the time. Library studies are a fairly recent field of intellectual history, and one that has not been much explored in Islamic studies where research has concentrated on individual authors and their works. The study of libraries as collections, on the other hand, helps us to gain insights into the composition of learning, the spread and 'popularity' of certain texts, which allows us better to understand the intellectual formation of educated people at the time. This makes the Ka^cti library a unique treasure for the intellectual history of the Middle Niger region. It includes a good variety of titles in all important subject matters of Arabic-Islamic learning. Out of a sample of 353 texts, I found 97 on jurisprudence (27%), 65 Qur^ʿāns and Qur^ʿānic studies (18%), 47 works relating to pious practices (13%), 36 on Arabic grammar and language (10%), 19 on Prophetic Traditions (5%), 17 relating on historical subjects (5%), 16 works of poetry and literature (5%), 10 Sufi titles (3%), 9 on *tawḥīd* (3%), 5 each on preaching, dream interpretation, astronomy, and magic (1%), and 2 each on medicine, mathematics, and logic (1%).³

The oldest manuscripts in the Ka^cti collection were penned in the fourteenth century; most are of West or North African hands,⁴ and some are exquisite examples of Arabic calligraphy and the arts of book illumination. There are no manuscripts from al-Andalus among them, only of Andalusian authors. A catalogue of these was published in Seville in September 2000; I have not yet been able to see this.

36 out of the 2821 numbered manuscripts in the current collection appear to be from the original sixteenth-century library, including at least two that Alfa^c Ka^cti

³ Figures do not add up to 353 since some mss. belong to several different categories.

⁴ In a random sample of 121 mss, Abdel Kader identified 40 Sūqī (33%), 31 Maghribī (26%), 21 Sūdānī (17%), 17 Ṣaḥrāwī (14%), and 12 Eastern (10%) hands. The classification of West African Arabic scripts is of course a science that has hardly developed since the seminal article by A. D. H. Bivar, "The Arabic calligraphy of West Africa", *African Languages Review*, 7 (1969), pp. 3-15. This is an issue that ISITA may usefully take up and pursue in the future, based on an emerging network of manuscript databases.

Maḥmūd inherited from his father ʿAlī b. Ziyād, the Goth. Just how long this Maḥmūd Kaʿti “the first” lived is still an open question. Ismael sees him as having left notes between 902-999 h = 1496-1591, and to have died on 1 Muḥarram 1002 = 26 September 1593 (a date taken from al-Saʿdī’s *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*). In my view, a more detailed study of the notes is needed, in terms of content, paper and ink used, etc., to establish whether the first Maḥmūd Kaʿti really lived over a century, or whether the notes must be attributed to two different persons bearing the same name. In any case, however, it is clear that the 36 books in question are from a sixteenth-century library. The remainder was added by the descendants of Maḥmūd over the following centuries. These descendants spread across different places in northern and central Mali. From Tindirma, where the Kaʿtis served as *qāḍīs* during the sixteenth century, they moved to Kirchamba early in the seventeenth century, and the descendants of *qāḍī* Ismāʿīl, Maḥmūd’s elder son, still live there. The offspring of Ismāʿīl’s brother ʿAlī moved further south. Maḥmūd Kaʿti “the second” b. ʿAlī, for example, lived and died in Bīna, on the Bani River near Gomitogo, ca. 50 km south of Djenné (d. 16 Shawwāl 1058: 2 Nov. 1648). His descendants established themselves in places such as Thié (near Djenné), Goundam, and even Goumbou (where their ancestor ʿAlī the Goth had ended his trans-Saharan journey); some migrated back to the Timbuktu and Lake Débo area.

The present “Fondo Kati” (the name Ismael Diadié has given to his collection)⁵ brings together manuscripts passed on through the generations in the different branches of the Kaʿti family. The precise history of the individual parts remains to be researched. According to Ismael, the core of the original sixteenth-century library was in the care of Ismael I. Alfaʿ Kaʿti Maḥmūd in Tindirma and was then passed on during the first part of the seventeenth century to his nephew, Maḥmūd Kaʿti (II) b. ʿAlī in Bīna. Other prominent owners were the late eighteenth-century ʿAlī Gāo who moved to Goundam, and his son-in-law Muḥammad [b.] Abana of Thié in the Djenné area. In the mid-19th century, during the Fulānī dīna of Ḥamdallāhi, the core of the Kaʿti library was brought to Goundam and on to Timbuktu where it was placed under the control of the family of the Fulānī chargé-d’affaires of Timbuktu. It may be in this context and based on material found in the Kaʿti collection that Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir composed his now-famous forgery, MS C of the *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh* – but this is a matter that needs further investigation. It is not clear exactly what happened to the manuscripts brought to Timbuktu after the demise of the Ḥamdallāhi state.

⁵ The “Fondo Kati” was registered as a public library on 27 September 2000. Ismael Diadié Haïdara is the legal owner of the collection (although he prefers to be called, “responsible”). Address: BP 66, Tombouctou, Mali, tel. +223-921127.

Currently, the Fondo Kati manuscripts are all stored in Ismael Diadié's house. There are 3 trunks full of 'bound' books, plus a large number of unbound manuscripts (fragments of books, epistles, letters, *ijāzāt*, documents etc.). Most of the manuscripts are kept in Ismael's library, a tiny room clearly not sufficient for the purpose (from the point of view of space, light, and air). This library room currently holds 2 trunks plus ca. eight 1 meter-long shelves full of unbound manuscripts (generally kept in paper folders). Most of the library is taken up by bookshelves full of European books mostly on philosophy (Ismael's 'proper' field) and history.

An estimated 400 manuscripts are still in the possession of a branch of the Ka^cti family near Kirchamba – perhaps the descendants of Ismā'īl I, the eldest son of Maḥmūd Ka^cti I. Ismael Diadié wants to incorporate these c. 400 mss into the Fondo Kati but has not yet succeeded in doing so. Not least, Ismael hopes to find among them a work by Maḥmūd Ka^cti I. entitled *Tadhkirat al-ikhwān* which allegedly describes the history of Visigothic Spain and of his family in Toledo. This work is so far known only through a summary written in 1519 on the margins of a *tafsīr* (#2) and a referral in a marginal note (#708?) by Ibrāhīm b. °Alī b. Maḥmūd Ka^cti (?? which one? prob. 19th c.).

Since 1999, the Timbuktu scholar Abdel Kader Haïdara has gone through much of the collection systematically together with Ismael Diadié. They sorted the manuscripts into those containing references to the Ka^cti family (in marginal notes etc., *v.i.*), and those not containing such references. The 'Ka^cti' manuscripts were roughly arranged by provenance or name of the family member they are associated with. All but a dozen have been numbered; the total thus reached is 2821 (the figure is not 100% precise since there are occasional gaps in the sequence, and I encountered at least one double number). Abdel Kader started to prepare brief descriptions on sheets of paper inserted into the manuscripts or wrapped around them. The manuscripts range from 1 to ca. 600 ff. Their physical condition varies from acceptable to extremely fragile; quite a few are incomplete fragments of books.

In addition to books, the Ka^cti collection contains perhaps 500 original documents of trade, slavery issues, reports of scholarly links, etc. Plus, very many of the book manuscripts are liberally strewn with marginal notes of a documentary character; some manuscripts have long notes on almost every page. Ismael estimates their total number at least at 1500. Many of them have no direct bearing on the main text of the manuscript. They are records of events that in one way or another concerned the owner of the manuscript, and he simply put them there because paper was

scarce and whoever wrote the note wanted it to last and so put it in one the books in his collection. The Ka^cti library is unique in this regard as well. While I have seen a few Arabic manuscripts before containing similar notes, I have never come across such a large collection where note-taking appears to have been the order of the day. The Ka^cti notes bear on a great variety of subjects. The shortest ones are 'reading notes', where the person studying the book at hand reaches a certain passage and writes next to it, "I reached this far in my reading", often giving his name and a date. And then a few pages further on you find another note saying "I reached this far" and giving another date. As I went through the collection together with Abdel Kader Haïdara, one of the area's leading specialists on Arabic manuscripts, and we were crammed into the tiny little room that is Ismael's study, sweating at 100° F with no ventilation, I noticed the slow progress indicated by these reading notes, at sometimes not more than two or three pages a day, and we were joking that the person studying this must have endured similarly hot and airless conditions... (As a matter of fact, 'reading' here probably means 'studying' the text, discussing it with a teacher and perhaps even memorizing it, although the precise meaning remains to be established – again, these reading notes are unique and I know of no similar ones from other parts of the Muslim world).

But there are many other kinds of notes: records of names of teachers, notes on contemporary events or on historical subjects, geographical, astronomical, and meteorological observations, judicial cases, inheritance problems, land ownership disputes, family matters, books bought, lent out, or returned, even contracts of sale of other merchandise. I have translated to you earlier on the earliest note in the collection, where the *Shifā'* was bought in Tuwāt in 1468, giving very interesting incidental information along the way. This is a good but only a minor example compared to others of what these notes contain. In other notes, we find detailed information, mostly so far unknown, on the reign of the Songhay ruler Askiya Muḥammad, the way he came to power in 1492, the role played by Maḥmūd Ka^cti at his court, Askiya Muḥammad's pilgrimage in 1496 and the people that joined him, a leather carpet bought by Maḥmūd Ka^cti in Cairo on his way back from Mecca for 15 dinar, a season of abundant rains and a good harvest in 1504, a remarkable display of shooting stars in December 1505, a Moroccan delegation to the Askiya's court in 1506, the arrival that same year of Musā, son of Maḥmūd Ka^cti's father by his first, Spanish wife, from Spain via Tuwāt together with other Spanish refugees, the organization of the Public Treasury by Maḥmūd Ka^cti in 1514 and travels he undertook around the Empire in the service of the state, controlling expenses, for example, for the restoration of the mosque at Djenné or the royal palace at Gao. The death of a leading Timbuktu scholar (Aḥmad b. ʿUmar Aqīt) in 1535 is recorded, the activities of an itinerant judge, medical and ophthalmologic

problems, the visit of a 'white' (probably Portuguese) delegation coming from the southern coast in 1568, and then, in 1591, the arrival of "our brethren from al-Andalus, from the land of the forefathers" – this is how the notes describe the Moroccan expedition corps that put an end to the Songhay Empire and established a new rule in Timbuktu. It was composed primarily of Spanish converts to Islam, some of whom married into the family of Maḥmūd Kaʿti, as the notes report. Later generations of the Kaʿti family recorded their distaste for the rule of the Arma, the descendants of this expedition corps.

It is this type of information that is extremely interesting to the historian, providing texture and depth and social detail to a history so far chiefly known through chronicles and king lists and scholarly biographies. The Kaʿti library is an extraordinary treasure house full of such information, which will take many years and the combined efforts of many scholars to exhaust.⁶ The close study of the material it provides will certainly much enrich and deepen our understanding of the political, social, and intellectual history of the Middle Niger region.

Ismael is very concerned to properly maintain his collection and prevent its disintegration and misuse. Other than physically preserving it, he seeks scholarly assistance in cataloguing its contents and in editing the marginal notes found in the manuscripts. Abdel Kader and Ismael have begun to transcribe and translate some of the notes with a view to publishing them, but found themselves overwhelmed by the sheer amount. To help overcome these difficulties, and to salvage the unique heritage the Kaʿti Library constitutes, Ismael turned to John Hunwick to coordinate international efforts in this regard. This has meanwhile borne fruit. Funding has been granted to physically conserve the manuscripts, catalogue them, and make them accessible for scholarly exploitation. After treatment by a conservationist, the manuscripts need to be properly stored. The plan is further to establish and publish a detailed catalogue of the collection, and to make digital images of all or some of its items, made accessible eventually over the Internet, which would allow researchers to study the texts without having to handle the physical manuscripts. By

⁶ Most notes on historical subjects left by Maḥmūd Kaʿti I, as well as some of Ismāʿīl's notes on family issues, have been transcribed by Abdel Kader, and Ismael Diadié seeks expert advice to publish them. The other notes have not been tackled yet, as both Abdel Kader and Ismael were "exhausted" by the sheer number of notes and the time and effort it takes to transcribe and interpret them. Meanwhile, Ismael has finished the draft of a new book on the history of the Kaʿti family, entitled *Mémoires* or *La mémoire rompue* which he has submitted to a publisher. This book is based on Ismael's understanding of some of the marginal notes as translated to him by Abdel Kader Haïdara, on oral traditions that Ismael gathered from members of his family, and from various published historical and philosophical works. I wish to express my gratitude to Ismael for having allowed me to consult the draft of this work from which I have benefited enormously.

way of an example, I have taken 54 images from 36 different manuscripts; with one exception these never reproduce a complete ms item.

I hope I have been able to convey to you some of the excitement I felt when I approached this extraordinary treasure. Timbuktu was once the paramount symbol for the riches to be found at the far end of the world. There is so much still out there to be discovered.