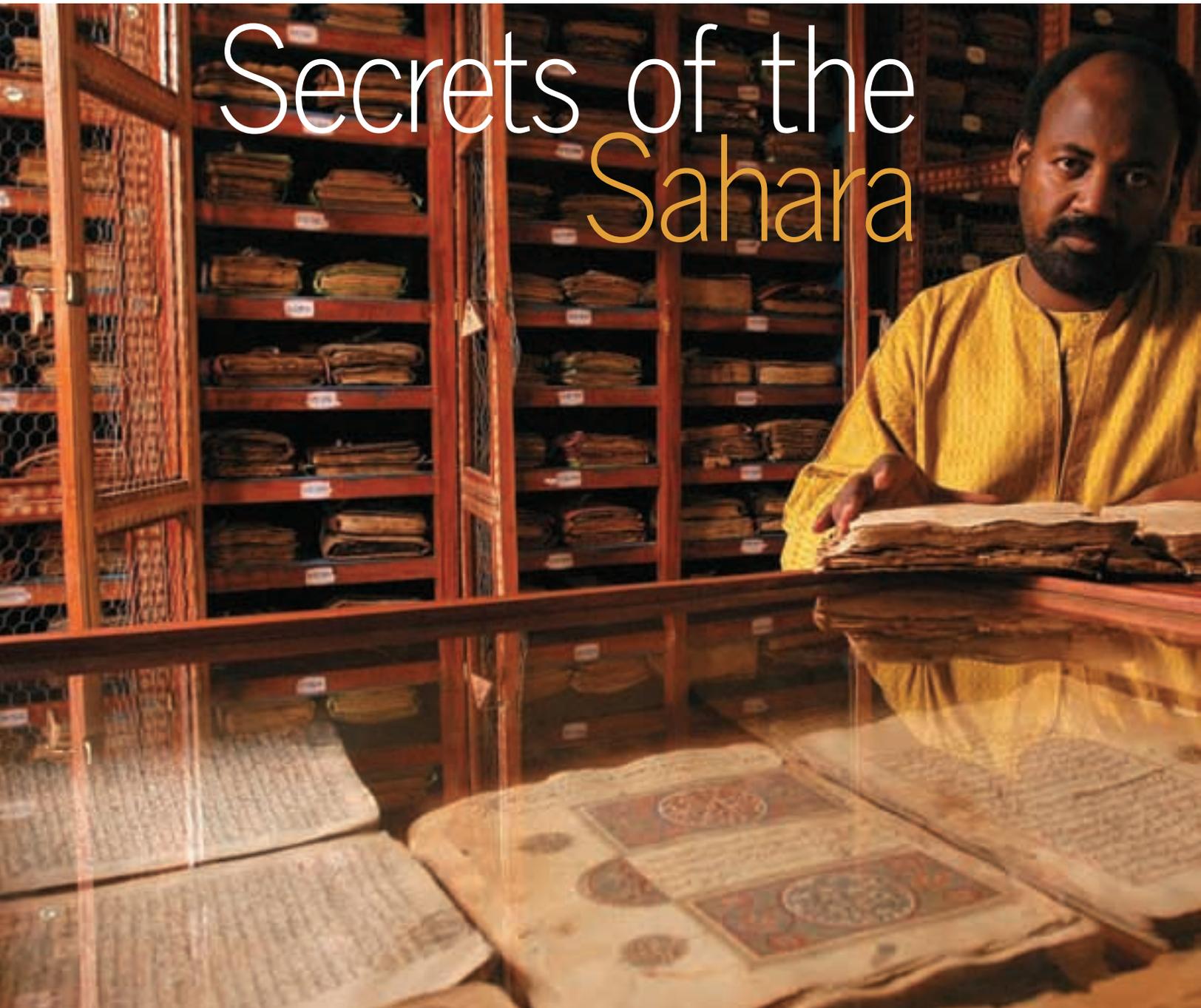




Dozens of families in Timbuktu are working to preserve a trove of ancient manuscripts that may redefine the history of Islam and Africa.

BY CHRISTOPHER REARDON

Secrets of the Sahara



Timbuktu, Mali—As dusk sweeps across the Sahara Desert, the Es Sayouti brothers—six learned men ranging from 40 to 55 years old—gather in their parents' home to reflect on the vexing legacy they share. Abdrahamane speaks first, as he is the eldest and the imam at the nearby Djingarey Ber Mosque, a place of prayer and scholarship since 1325. He explains that their father, who is in failing health and resting downstairs, has recently given them responsibility for 2,500 ancient texts gathering dust in the next room.

“Our forefathers have left these manuscripts to future generations, and we must do the same,” says Abdrahamane. “The problems we face are how to keep them in good condition and how to make them available to scholars.”

The magnitude of these challenges becomes clear when he opens the doors to a large wooden cabinet, its shelves piled high with brittle manuscripts dating back to the 14th century. Some have been damaged by fire and termites, others by flooding and high humidity during the rainy season. One of the brothers opens an illuminated copy of the Koran from the 1600's. Abdrahamane leafs through a treatise on optics and astronomy, with diagrams depicting the motions of the planets in black and red ink. It dates from the 1300's, long before Galileo, Kepler or even Copernicus made their marks in Europe.

The Es Sayouti brothers are not alone. In recent years, 300 private collections have come to light in Mali, the bulk of them in Timbuktu, a city of 60,000 people on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. Together these collections hold as many as one million manuscripts, ranging from one to 500 pages each. Most are written in Arabic, although some use Arabic script to transliterate local tongues that had no written counterpart.

Researchers who have taken a preliminary look at some of these texts say they shed light on important facets of social history and religious thought and practice before the colonial era began in the 19th century. Upon closer inspection, they may

Abdoul Kader Haïdara, one of Timbuktu's leading manuscript experts, opened the city's first private archive in 1998. It contains scientific treatises, Islamic sermons, legal documents, medical commentaries and poetry.

Opposite A family library in Bouj Beha, 150 miles north of Timbuktu, holds manuscripts, dating back several centuries, that are endangered by poor storage conditions.



PHOTOGRAPHS THIS SPREAD: XAVIER ROSSI/GAMMA

compel scholars to rewrite the history of Islam and of Africa and to abolish once and for all the persistent Western stereotype of black Africans as primitive and lacking in intellectual traditions.

“These manuscripts have been here all along,” says Stephanie Diakit , an American scholar who advises the Malian government. “What’s revolutionary is that they are finally being recognized as manifestations of everyday culture within a highly literate society. They did not come like a bolt out of the blue. They are vestiges of people living their lives and writing things down, as all civilized cultures do.”

Many of the ancient texts date back to the Songhaï empire, a prosperous kingdom that peaked in the 15th and 16th centuries. Today, Timbuktu relies on arts and crafts for the tourist industry and on nomadic herding to subsist. But five or six centuries ago, it was a major crossroads for caravans of gold and salt traversing the Sahara. The book trade also flourished, and the city’s Sankor  Mosque became a center of learning, attracting thousands of students each year. Even today, a small number of people live off the traditions of scholarship, writing or interpreting texts.

The larger books—hundreds of unbound pages wrapped in leather covers—often include a colophon, a statement about their authorship and production. Some identify the author, the person who commissioned a new copy, the calligrapher who copied the text, the person who verified that it was accurate and the artisans who gilded the illustrations and prepared the leather binding. Diakit , a master bookbinder who holds a doctorate in law, another in international development and an M.B.A., says these colophons likely served as legal contracts, with names, dates and fees.

“The manuscripts talk about everything,” says Abdoul Kader Haïdara, 38, who opened the city’s first private archive, the Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library, in 1998. “There are copies of the Koran and hadiths [sayings of the prophet Muhammad] as well as sermons and explanations of Islamic law. There are treatises on astronomy, mathematics, medicine and geography. There are poems and folk tales.”

He adds: “We have found contracts on slavery; commercial records that document the gold and salt trades; letters and decrees showing how Muslim jurists resolved conflicts between families and states. Some of the manuscripts talk about women’s rights and children’s rights. Others are family histories and chronicles of political and economic life as far back as the 11th century.”

Abdoul Kader is one of Timbuktu’s leading manuscript experts, and the son of a renowned local collector, Mamma Haïdara. While growing up, he spent long hours at his father’s side, reading the family’s manuscripts and learning how to care for them. When Abdoul Kader was just 17, his father died, leaving the venerable collection in his young hands.

Aided by a generally arid climate, people in Timbuktu have managed this task for centuries. But time is working against them. The Sahara has been inching south and sand is filling the city streets, which contributes to flooding in the brief rainy sea-

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XAVIER ROSSI/GAMMA



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son. Acidic paper and ferrous inks introduced in the 19th century are slowly burning through adjacent manuscripts; metal trunks of similar vintage contract and sweat depending on the weather, causing books to buckle and rot. And termites seem to be everywhere. Consequently, many owners in Mali, a landlocked country that ranks among the poorest in the world, see their stewardship of these texts as both a sacred honor and a costly burden.

“These manuscripts are very expensive for the family,” says one of the Es Sayouti brothers, an engineer named Alpha Sane. “But we fear the judgment of our sons and grandsons if we let them disappear.”

An Emerging Network

The first concerted effort to save Mali’s ancient manuscripts got under way in 1970, when UNESCO helped establish the Ahmed Baba Center for Documentation and Research in Timbuktu. Named after one of the city’s leading 16th-century schol-

Three scholars on the site of a new library to house the Kati collection of manuscripts once scattered among several branches of the family.

Top: Abdrahamane Es Sayouti on the roof of the Djingarey Ber Mosque, where he is the imam. He is one of six brothers charged with protecting the family’s legacy of precious manuscripts.

ars, the center was envisioned as a place where these texts could be restored, catalogued and made accessible to researchers. It got off to a promising start, led by its founding director, Mahmoud Zouber, who spoke six languages and wrote his dissertation on Baba while at the Sorbonne. (It was published in France in 1977.)

The center borrowed its initial holdings from private collectors, but its long-term plan was to buy manuscripts from families that could no longer care for them. Although it acquired a few thousand manuscripts, many owners refused to part with texts their families had held for generations—even if it meant watching them slowly turn to dust. Zouber sought to win over such heirs by enlisting Abdoul Kader Haïdara as a prospector. As the son of a well-liked collector, Haïdara stood a better chance of getting his foot in the door, but closing a deal ultimately rested on his own expertise and charisma.

Once, for example, Haïdara visited a family in Rharrou, 100 miles down river from Timbuktu. The father, a local marabout, or shaman, had recently died, leaving a wife, several young children, and a small case filled with manuscripts. “At first the marabout’s wife refused to sell,” Haïdara recalls. “She said that the texts belonged to her children, and that we would have to wait for them to grow up before touching their inheritance. I showed her that termites had already destroyed some of the manuscripts, and soon they would take the rest. By the time the children reached adulthood, their father’s legacy would be nothing but a pile of dust.”

Then Haïdara revised his offer. Instead of paying cash, he would trade two young cows for the manuscripts. That way, he said, the children would have an asset that gained value over time, unlike the decaying manuscripts. This time the widow accepted. “Two years later I went back to Rharrou, and they were thrilled to see me,” Haïdara says. “The two cows had bred and become four. The family told their relatives, and suddenly everyone there was ready to sell to me.”

Between 1984 and 1996, Haïdara acquired 12,000 manuscripts for the center. Gradually, though, he came to wonder if consolidating Mali’s ancient texts was the best way to save them. As

a collector who had inherited thousands of manuscripts from his parents—and bought hundreds more on his own—he understood the widespread reluctance to part with a cherished family legacy.

With help from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who heads the Afro-American Studies program at Harvard, Haïdara raised money for a library to house his collection. The Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation in London funded his efforts to catalog the collection. Al-Furqan will publish the final volume of the catalog later this year.

In recent years, Haïdara and other local collectors have been working on a new approach to preserving the ancient manuscripts. Together, they are trying to develop a network of private libraries that would enable owners to share resources and speak collectively, yet allow families to retain possession of their manuscripts. As a first step, they started the Association for the Safekeeping of Ancient Manuscripts, which now represents 23 private collections in Timbuktu.

“My dream is that in 20 years’ time, all these manuscripts will be restored and digitized and begun to be published,” says Haïdara. “Because after that, scholars can read them and analyze their significance in human history.”

The association educates owners about the importance of the manuscripts they have inherited and shows them how to store texts properly. Ultimately, it hopes to mount exhibitions in Timbuktu and abroad so the manuscripts can reach a wider audience (see p. 11). The association faced an important test earlier this year, after a pair of entrepreneurs from abroad persuaded several owners to sign away the rights to restore or exhibit their manuscripts. The contract was written in English, which none of the owners could read or speak. The association stepped in and drafted a declaration renouncing it.

The emerging network of private libraries still leaves a pivotal role for the Ahmed Baba Center, which was renamed the Ahmed Baba Institute for Advanced Study and Islamic Research three years ago. The association encourages owners of small collections to sell or lend their manuscripts to the institute for safekeeping. Meanwhile, owners of larger collections can turn to the institute for conservation or cataloguing services.

The institute, which is funded by Mali’s Ministry of Higher

Education but acts with relative autonomy, is still adjusting to this new role. “We think there are advantages to keeping the manuscripts in one place,” says Mohamed Gallah Dicko, who succeeded Zouber as director in 1996. “Among other things, it’s easier for researchers to access them. But we fully welcome the arrival of these private libraries. We are ready to help them.”

Two years ago the institute held a 12-week workshop to train seven local artisans in the art of book conservation. Stephanie Diakité, who led the workshop, says many of the artisans were descendants of the gilders and binders who worked on manuscripts generations ago. One trainee went home and looked through his tool chest, but couldn’t identify some of the tools, which he inherited from his ancestors. Diakité recognized them as stamping tools for bookbinding, and showed the trainee how to use them.

“These are generational artisans, but in many cases the skills have been lost,” she says. “It’s fascinating to see them make those connections again.”

The Spanish Connection

One of the most unusual collections in Timbuktu is held by Ismaël Diadié Haïdara, a local scholar who spends half his time lecturing at the University of Granada in Spain. He and Abdoul Kader Haïdara share a last name, but they are not related, as they explained one evening over dinner in Abdoul Kader’s home.

“He is a Sharifa,” says Ismaël, naming a scholarly clan from Bamba, 130 miles down river.

“And he is a Quti, a Goth,” replies Abdoul Kader, referring to the Christians who drove the Muslims out of the Iberian peninsula in 1492.

He is making a joke, but it plays on a kernel of truth. Although Ismaël is a devout Muslim with darker skin than Abdoul Kader, some of his ancestors came from Toledo when it was the seat of Christian power in northern Spain. On May 22, 1468, as religious intolerance mounted, Ali b. Ziyad al-Quti set out to make a new life in what he called “the land of the blacks.” He passed through the Muslim kingdom of Granada to Gibraltar and from there to Africa. Then, traveling by caravan, he continued through present-day Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania. Unlike many Muslims, he did not identify ethnically with Arabs or Berbers. Instead, he called himself al-Quti, the Goth.

In 1471 Ali settled in Goumbou (now a city in Mali), where he married the sister of Askia Mohamed, a black Muslim warrior who went on to rule the Songhaï empire for 37 years. Their son, Mahmud Kati, became Askia’s finance minister, directed the empire’s first census, served as a qadi, or judge, and stood second in line to the throne. As a man of letters, Kati not only collected books but also wrote an important history of the empire, the sprawling *Tarikh Al-Fettach*, known in English as the “Chronicle of the Seeker of Knowledge.” (Historians are still debating whether he or his descendants finished the book, which was translated into French in 1913 from a copy loaned by the Es Sayouti family.)

When Kati died, he left dozens of letters and books to his son Ismaël, who added to the collection and then passed it on to his offspring. So it went for generations, until Kati’s collection was divided among different branches of the family in the 19th century.

In August 1999, Ismaël Haïdara began to reassemble the Kati

African Islamic Civilization Revealed

The Ford Foundation supports the preservation and study of Timbuktu’s ancient manuscripts in several ways. A grant from the foundation’s office in Lagos, Nigeria, has made it possible for Stephanie Diakité to train 16 local residents to conserve, catalogue and digitize manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Institute for Advanced Study and Islamic Research. Meanwhile, a grant from the Religion, Society, and Culture program in New York helped establish the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa. Based at Northwestern University, it seeks to foster a network of scholars from African and other universities who have the linguistic and other knowledge necessary to analyze the African Islamic civilization these documents reveal, with an eye to learning more about how Islam developed in Africa.

A street scene in Timbuktu, Mali, where scholars are using modern technology to preserve ancient manuscripts and make them accessible.

collection. He met with cousins in Thié and Kirchamba, hauling back trunks of manuscripts to his home in Timbuktu. A few weeks later he showed some of them to John Hunwick, a British historian who was a Western pioneer of the study of Islamic thought in pre-colonial Africa. Hunwick was awed by what he saw: a trove

of manuscripts dating back to the 14th century. Most were written in Arabic; others used Arabic script to record ideas expressed in Fulani and other spoken languages. The papers included academic treatises, sermons, legal documents and poetry by women.

Most significantly, the core of the collection can be traced to Mahmud Kati, providing a palpable sense of how black Muslim scholars in Timbuktu wrestled with ideas and passed on knowledge in the 15th and 16th centuries. Previously, most scholarship in the field has focused on individual texts, not on the body of work that a single scholar would have studied.

“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,” says Albrecht Hofheinz, a German scholar who conducted a preliminary survey of the Kati collection a few years ago. “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 Kati library a unique treasure for the intellectual history of the Middle Niger region.”

The manuscripts are also noteworthy, Hofheinz and Hunwick say, because Kati and others jotted extensive notes in the margins. Some comment directly on the text. But because paper was scarce, many are entirely unrelated observations about weddings, funerals and abundant rains. One, signed by Kati, appears to describe a meteor shower:

“In the year 991 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.”

Construction is now under way for a library to house the Kati collection, which encompasses more than 7,000 manuscripts. The Spanish government is funding the building, which wraps around a central courtyard in the Andalusian style.

“I come from a family of writers,” says Ismaël, who published a family history in Spain a few years ago. “We have been writing for 15 generations, so writing comes easily to me. The harder challenge I face is how to catalog, restore and digitize the



WOLFGANG KAETLER/CORBIS

manuscripts my ancestors have left behind.”

A Closer Reading

During the colonial era, European scholars routinely took cultural artifacts out of Africa, ostensibly to forestall the ravages of time, weather, political instability and social upheaval. Africans no longer buy that argument, which was often a thinly veiled excuse for usurping their cultural inheritance. Yet collectors in Timbuktu recognize both the difficulty of preserving their manuscripts and the importance of making them accessible to researchers around the globe.

“These manuscripts talk about a vital period in our region’s history,” says one of the Es Sayouti brothers, an engineer named Alpha Sané. “But they are not just of local interest. They hold significance for all humanity.”

The city’s leading collectors are embracing modern technology as a tool for preservation and scholarship. The Ahmed Baba Institute, for instance, has trained eight local residents to scan and catalog ancient texts. Page by page, they are generating digital images of important manuscripts. Moreover, they are compiling a searchable database that identifies up to 33 features of each text—including the author, the date it was copied, and a summary of the text. It is painstaking work. So far, they have catalogued 1,000 of the institute’s 20,000 manuscripts. The Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library and the Kati Collection are also starting to digitize their manuscripts.

But computers are no more a panacea than the sturdy metal boxes introduced in the 19th century. Conservationists worry that the scanning process, which entails handling the manuscripts and exposing them to bright light, may hasten their deterioration. Owners have raised concerns about ethical and copyright issues, noting that digital images can be easily copied and exploited. Even computer experts admit that, given the uncertain life of compact disks and other media, as well as the rapid obsolescence of particular file formats, these digital images may not withstand the test of time. Yet the consensus is that the benefits of scanning outweigh these misgivings.

In the coming years, the Ministry of Education hopes students in Mali will begin to explore the history contained in the ancient manuscripts, starting at the university level and then in primary and secondary schools. “There are so many priorities in Africa,” says Diakitè, who advises the ministry. “It’s very diffi-

cult to take a long-term view. But reintroducing indigenous culture into the educational system can instill dignity and purpose. It's a powerful tool for development."

Meanwhile, scholars abroad are working to develop a network of young African researchers who can read, edit and translate the manuscripts in Timbuktu—and others like them in Mauritania, Nigeria and Zanzibar. The nucleus of these efforts is Chicago's Northwestern University, where Hunwick, the British historian, founded the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa in 2000.

The institute aims to bridge the gap between scholarship on Islam and scholarship on Africa. Scholars of Islam tend to ignore its development in Africa, Hunwick explains, despite the vast number of Muslims there. Likewise, many Africanists consider Islam marginal to their field. And scholars of religion largely overlook both the study of Islam in Africa and the study of religion in Africa in general. Through publications, symposia and fellowships for African researchers, the institute seeks to show that these fields

are more closely intertwined than most scholars recognize.

"We hope, too, to enlighten the general public as to the role that Islam has played in African societies," Hunwick says, "and to the fact that much of Africa has long enjoyed literacy and an intellectual life—matters that may help to erase some of the unfortunate stereotypes about Africa... [Then] 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."

Indeed, the world these manuscripts reveal is one in which a tremendous volume of goods and ideas flowed across the Sahara in all directions—linking Europe, Africa and Arabia. If not for the families who have preserved these texts all these years, this vibrant past might have been lost forever.

"When we speak, the words disappear," says Alpha Sané Ben Es Sayouti, who dreams of opening a private library to house his father's collection. "But what is written should remain for all time." ■

Coming to America: Scholars of Peace

In these turbulent times, it's tempting to reduce the economic, political and religious tensions felt in many parts of the world to a straightforward "clash of civilizations." This notion that Islam is inherently incompatible with Western culture may sound credible at first, but it trivializes the complexities of both Islam and the West. A landmark exhibition this summer in Washington, D.C., may help to set the record straight.

In June the Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library in Timbuktu, Mali, will send 23 ancient manuscripts to the Library of Congress for a rare and timely exhibit. Three of the manuscripts concern conflict resolution, while the others include religious teachings, medieval sciences, literature, historical records and mystical treatises. The show, which runs from June 24 to Sept. 3, marks the first time these texts have left Africa. It coincides with the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where Mali will share the spotlight with Scotland and Appalachia. (The festival runs from June 25 through July 6 on the National Mall.)

"There's a lot of material in this collection on conflict resolution, good governance and tolerance within the law and social structures," says Abdoul Kader Haïdara, who directs the Mamma Haïdara Memorial Library. "By bringing these manuscripts to the United States, we hope to show that these ideas and practices have a valued place in Islamic tradition."

A few years ago Haïdara joined forces with three other manuscript experts in Mali—Stephanie Diakité, Mamadou Diallo and Mahmoud Zouber—to promote scholarship on this overlooked history. After forming a research group, they wrote a paper together about some of the "scholars of peace" who drew on Islamic theology to resolve conflicts between individuals, families, communities and governments in West Africa. The paper, citing numerous manuscripts in Timbuktu, describes some of the techniques that scholars and civic leaders have used in the past to promote a culture of peace. "In the current context of global conflict," the authors write, "we would do well to learn from their interactions."

One of the manuscripts that Haïdara is bringing to Wash-

ington is a letter from Sheikh Sidi Ahmad Al Bekây Al Kuntî, a renowned scholar who died in Timbuktu in 1865. It is addressed to Ahmad Lobbo, a chief in Macina, 250 miles up the Niger River. The letter concerns Heinrich Barth, who led a British expedition that reached Timbuktu in September 1853. When Lobbo learned that Barth was staying in Al Bekây's home, he urged the sheikh to kill him because it was not normal for a white man to live among Muslims. Al Bekây replied with a poem.

In the poem, Al Bêkay "says the white man is his guest, and that he is ready to protect him at any price," Haïdara says. "He notes that Barth came in peace, and that the British people stopped making war with Muslims long ago. He also observes that Barth found safe passage through Egypt, Libya and Morocco—all Muslim countries. Why, he asks, should Timbuktu treat him any differently?"

The 23 texts in the exhibit offer a glimpse of Haïdara's extensive collection, which includes roughly 5,000 ancient manuscripts. Among the many that are not making the journey is a memoir by al-Haj Umar Tal, an important thinker and chief in Macina. Tal recounts how, during his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1820, he passed through Katsina and Bornu (now in northern Nigeria), where rival leaders were locked in a bitter conflict. He met with both sides, but had to hurry to reach Mecca in time for the Muslim holiday Eid al-Adha. On the way back from Mecca, where he prayed for insight on the matter, he returned to Katsina and Bornu and resolved the dispute.

"Tragedy is due to divergence and because of a lack of tolerance," Tal writes. "In the tradition of the Prophet, it is written that those who keep rancor in their hearts will not benefit from divine mercy. Tread carefully those of you who resuscitate the tradition of Kabyla. It is written by the Guide of mankind that he who associates himself with God and kills voluntarily will not be pardoned. Glory be to he who creates greatness from difference and makes peace and reconciliation." ■

For more information about the Library of Congress exhibit, visit www.loc.gov/exhibits. For information about the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, visit www.folklife.si.edu.