

## **EAP269: Preliminary survey of Arabic manuscripts in Djenne, Mali, with a view to a major project of preservation, digitisation and cataloguing**

Ms Sophie Sarin, La Mission Culturelle, Djenne  
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### **Further Information**

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# Preliminary Survey of Arabic manuscripts in Djenné, Mali, with a view to a Major Project of preservation, digitization and cataloguing

EAP 269

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## Introduction:

Djenné, the Unesco World Heritage listed town with its magnificent mud mosque was historically an important Sub-Saharan centre of learning and of commerce founded about a thousand years ago. The town has potentially as rich a deposit of Arabic Manuscripts as Timbuktu. Even today a tradition of copying Arabic text continues in the numerous Koran schools of Djenné, where young boys, (*talibés*) learn to write on wooden tablets. There are about fifty Koran schools in Djenné, and many of the *Marabouts*, or the Koran Masters in charge of these Koran Schools, are owners of manuscripts which have often been handed down from father to son through many generations. Some of the texts in these MSS are intended to be read aloud at the Koran schools at collective readings during the Islamic year. The Djenné Manuscripts also include secular works, and many collections are kept in private homes not connected to Koran Schools.

The present survey continues the work initiated by the Malian manuscript expert Abdel Kader Haidara and Stephanie Diakitè in 2004, when Haidara estimated that there were in the region of 10 000 manuscripts in Djenné. At this time Haidara made a catalogue of the collection of the Imam Korobora, still the present Imam of Djenné. This was intended to form the basis of the newly built Djenné Library but since then the Imam has decided to keep the majority of his MSS apart in a private library although he left 100 MSS as part of the Djenné Library Collection. The MSS that are now kept in the Djenné library are therefore mainly bequests from other Djenné sources. During the

months of August to November 2009, this present Endangered Archives Programme survey was carried out with the aim of establishing the scope and extent of the Arabic manuscripts in Djenné, including those held by the Djenné library as well as in the residences of individual Djenné families, some of these connected to Koran Schools.

The project was launched by an event televised on Malian News at the Djenné Library on August 16<sup>th</sup> to which the town dignitaries were invited as well as representatives of the ancient Djenné families known to be in possession of manuscript collections. Abdel Kader Haidara was present as the advisor on the project and he gave an address. The same evening a banquet was held at the library itself. This was intended to promote good will from the town's population and facilitate the work of the archivists. It achieved its purpose in so far that numerous families contacted the archivist team and appointments were made to view their private collections in situ in the family residences. In addition many manuscripts were handed over to the safe keeping of the library itself.

The team of researchers included one experienced archivist from Timbuktu, Samba Ibrahim, and two Djenné archivists connected to the Djenné manuscript Library, Garba Yaro and Yelfa Djéité. These two received instruction in the listing and handling of manuscripts by Samba Ibrahim in the course of the work. Towards the end of the project the team was joined by Moustafa Issa from Timbuktu, who spent one month transferring the hand-written Arabic notes by the team onto computer as well as instructing Garba Yaro in how to continue this work.

Abdel Kader Haidara, having laid down the guidelines to the work in August returned to spend a few days in December to inspect what had been achieved and to give advice on how to proceed with a future potential Major Project.

#### Methodology:

Two areas of manuscripts were surveyed:

1. The Djenné Library Collection
2. Manuscripts held at family residences.

The month of Ramadan fell during the first month of the project. It was decided that visits to individual families would be better postponed until the end of Ramadan and therefore the team concentrated on the listing of the Djenné Library collection for the first month.

The Djenné Library contained 1519 Manuscripts at the beginning of the project, donated by 24 families, the Imam Korabora's included. These MSS have been listed in preparation for the eventual cataloguing of the material. Each family collection has been given a spreadsheet, on which each MSS is listed under the following headings: A: Number of MSS; B: Name of MSS; C: Subject; D: Author; E: Copyist; F: Date; G: Folios; H: Language; I: Condition and other remarks on the MSS.

Appendix 1 contains a spreadsheet in Arabic with 6 examples of MSS listed from the Djenné Library, following the scheme outlined above. These are from six different family collections and include a Dictionary, a copy of the *Tariq es Soudan*, a document dealing with Astronomy and one dealing with Magic.

By the time the project ended, 9 further families had given another 653 MSS, thus bringing the Djenné Library Manuscript collection to a total of 2172. These last acquisitions have not been listed yet, since the team was concentrating on the private collections for the three last months of the project following Ramadan, making daily visits to the homes of the owners who had agreed to show their manuscripts.

13 families opened their doors and their MSS collections to the team. Often several days were needed to sort through numerous chests and boxes storing the documents. The owner of the collection was invariably present, sometimes insisting on touching the manuscripts himself only. In the majority of cases several visits were necessary, and the team had to fit in with the owner's schedule.

In order to gain a rapid overview of the material available for viewing it was decided that the manuscripts should simply be counted. Information with regards to content was gathered by devising a sheet with 30 descriptive headings such as 'the Holy Koran', Jurisprudence, Astronomy, Rhetoric etc. and each manuscript was entered with a tick on the sheet in its respective category. Each family collection is represented by one such sheet only at the present moment, and these 13 sheets are the most relevant result of the present survey, and are attached as Appendix 2. The 30 descriptive headings on the sheet were made in Arabic and the notes were made in Arabic throughout the project, but translated into French by a member of Haidara's translation team in Timbuktu for the purposes of this report, and I translated it into English from the French.

Once a manuscript had been entered on the list, it was put between a folded sheet of ordinary white copy paper for safe keeping and to demarcate its entity as one manuscript. It was then returned to its storage trunk, which was in most cases a metal chest, a relatively safe storage place, and it remained in the majority of cases in the location it had been viewed.

#### Result:

Our archivists did not make any speculation as to the age or importance of any particular document. They noted that the oldest dated manuscript found in the Djenné Library was a Grammar from 1631. Many manuscripts may be much older since dating is not common.

There were a number of MSS that were noted because they were unusual: a manuscript dealing with theology in the Fulani language but written with Arabic script; A *Tariq* (History) of Macina, a Malian town of historical importance; a document dealing with traditional medicine from Mauretania; a biography of Fulani men of letters; A History of the Fulani people; a copy of the *Tariq es Soudan*, an account of commercial connections between Djenné and Libya and Tunisia and a census of the Sankoré district of Djenné.

The Timbuktu Archivist Samba noted that there was a difference between the MSS of Djenné and those of Timbuktu in that there were a much larger proportion of documents dealing with the subject of magic in Djenné. Roughly half of all the new MSS viewed were entered under the heading 'Esotericism'. Samba Ibrahim assured me that this meant, in this context, magic. This is not unexpected, because Djenné has had, and still has, a reputation for witch craft and *maraboutage*. Samba also noted that the people of Djenné showed a high level of suspicion and were worried

about showing their documents. They did not understand why the team was interested in just seeing the MSS, and feared perhaps that they would be stolen, hence their insistence on being present at the viewings. But Samba also said that the archivists had encountered this sort of resistance in the beginning in Timbuktu too, and Haidara agreed that it was to be expected.

The archivists agree in their opinion that the MSS shown to the team are incomplete in almost all cases. During the visits it became clear that many manuscript owners were willing to show only a fraction of their collection, sometimes indicating that they would be willing to show more at a later date. Often several large chests full of manuscripts remained unopened. It is likely that the MSS shown are not the ones regarded as the most important. There are also many more families in possession of MSS, who have not yet agreed to invite the team, although promises have been given in many cases, either to donate to the Library or to allow access in their homes at a later date.

There was a certain resistance to the project because it was perceived that those who took part by opening their doors and their collections should in some way receive a remuneration. It is therefore remarkable that so many families, many of them so poor that they are not always able to eat their fill, should have agreed to take part, and even to donate to the library although they received nothing.

#### Conclusion:

The work undertaken remains incomplete, partly because of the sheer quantity of manuscripts here and partly because of a resistance on behalf of the population.

Abdel Kader Haidara was more than satisfied with the team's efforts and the result. He indicated that he would be willing to continue as our Malian consultant, should the project continue as a Major Project. He suggests that Djenné should adopt the methods of Timbuktu, and it would indeed be the natural way to progress, since Timbuktu's manuscript collections are now well on their way to being saved for posterity. His recommendations for a Major Project include importance being placed on frequent workshops which would give the local population an opportunity to learn about various aspects of the manuscripts. In that way the owners of the collections can themselves actively become involved in the preservation of their manuscripts, and a valuable impetus will be created where the manuscripts will be regarded as something important for Djenné.

It is not possible to evaluate the importance of the new manuscripts this Pilot Study has found until they have been studied in more detail. But this eventual study, as Haidara modestly but correctly points out, is perhaps not the function of our team. We are here to preserve and to put into place a well ordered library of manuscripts, and to provide digital copies of these, in order for researchers to make use of the facilities we have created. These future researchers are the ones who will decide on the value of the documents once they have been recovered by our team during the Major Project which we hope will follow.

Sophie Sarin, Djenne 25 February 2010

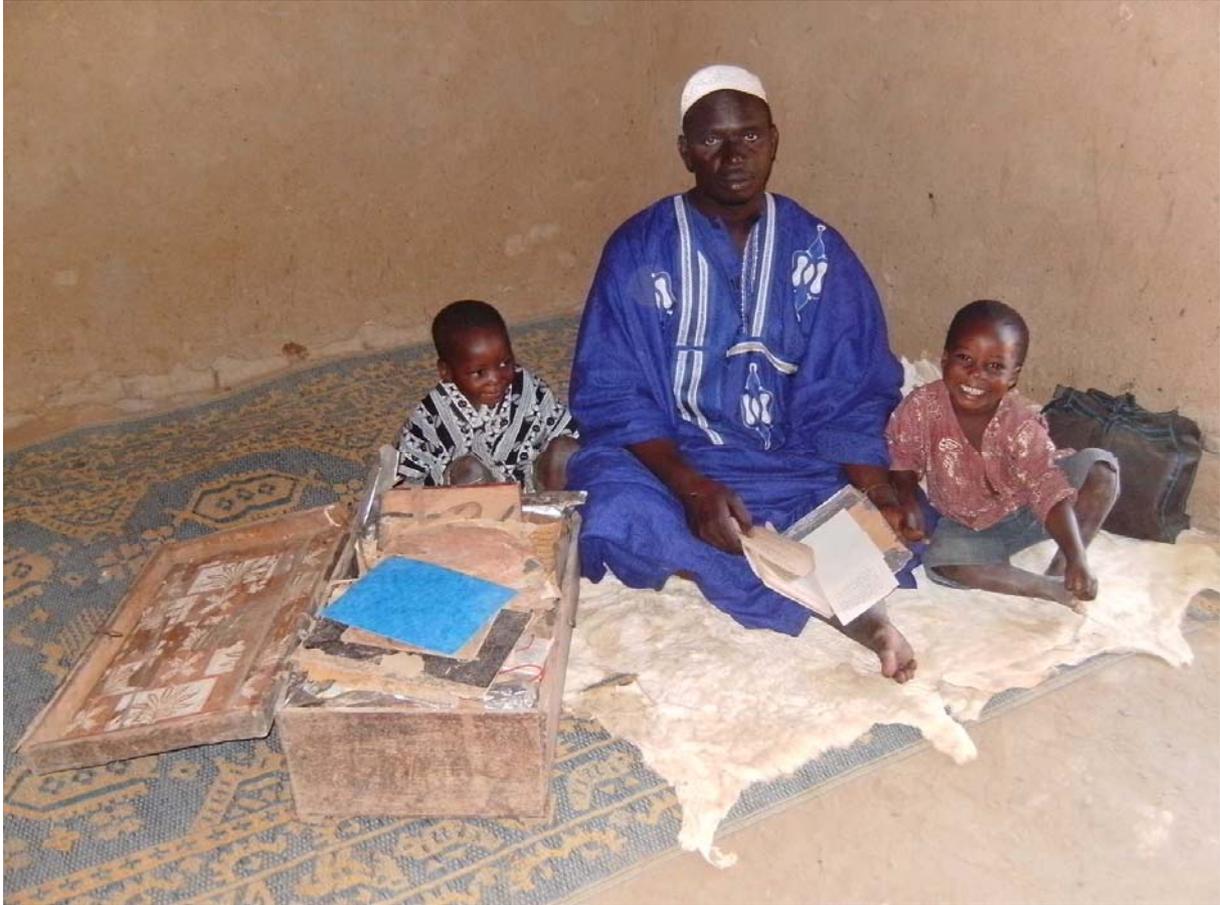
Photographs



Monsieur Ahmed Bacaina Traoré, Kintigi (neighbourhood chief) of the district of Kanafia, Djenné. His collection is large and part of it was shown to the team: 853 MSS are listed. M. Traoré donated one document to the Djenné Library: a Koran.



Metal storage trunk with manuscripts at M. Traoré's family residence.



Koran Master Alpha Issa Kanta with his two sons and a trunk of manuscripts. His collection remains at his residence, which is attached to his Koran School. His collection is large and he chose to show 1035 MSS to the team.



MSS in Djenné Library dated 1717. This document contains magic formulae to be used in order to gain promotion in one's professional life.



Pupil at Alpha Issa Kanta's Koran school, with the wooden tablets on which verses of the Koran are copied in Arabic.



Djenne Library archivists Garba Yaro (left) and Yelpha Dieité work on MSS at Master Kanta's Koran school.

