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The original article appeared in *World Libraries* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 2004). The present version was reformatted without any textual change.

World Libraries (ISSN 1092-7441) is published twice a year by Dominican University Graduate School of Library and Information Science, River Forest, Illinois 60305 | T 708-524-6845 | F 708-524-6657 | E-mail worldlib@dom.edu
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The Book and the Sand: Restoring and Preserving the Ancient Desert Libraries of Mauritania — Part 1

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Abstract: Ever since prehistoric times, the Sahara desert has been a barrier to communication and exchange, as well as a site of trade and habitation. The introduction of the camel, between the second and the fifth centuries A.D., and the spread of Islam to North Africa during the seventh and eighth, significantly increased the volume of trans-Saharan trade, leading to the establishment of a number of commercial outposts along the main caravan routes. In addition to gold, salt and slaves, books and the materials to produce them (paper in particular) were among the top commodities of the trans-Saharan trade, which helped some strategically located trading posts to become important centers of book production and intellectual activity. By the eighteenth century, when the trade reached its heyday, a few caravan towns in Mauritania, namely Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt, and Oualata, had become so renowned throughout the Islamic world for their religious scholars and their libraries, that only the legendary Timbuktu rivaled them in this part of the world. Today, these “desert libraries” are represented by several thousand manuscripts and printed books that document the evolution of Islamic thought in western Africa, while providing important insights in the trans-Saharan book trade. This article describes the origin and evolution of Mauritania’s desert libraries, the attention and interest they generated outside the Islamic world, and the main efforts conducted so far to locate, collect, catalog, restore, and preserve this unique cultural treasure.

Introduction

There is no desert but the Desert, as-Sahara, uncompassionate, unmerciful, fabled and forbidding as any respectable myth is supposed to be. As the name itself implies, the Sahara is the desert *par excellence*, a geographical archetype imbued with a hypertrophic sense of place — or placelessness. Together with its climatic opposite, the Poles, it fulfils and represents our civilized, Oedipal need for an ultimate *terra incognita*: immense, unconquerable, and unforgiving as any mother-earthly place can be, or as the

imagination of an outsider will make it. To the Tuaregs and the Moors who inhabit its “Fearful Void” (as a British traveler has called it), and whose material and spiritual lives are shaped by it, the Sahara is neither fearful nor void, but alive and rich and resourceful, just like the frozen tundra is for the Inuit of northern Canada. On the contrary, to an European, whether he has been scorched by its sands or charmed by its legends, the great desert is first and foremost a cultural construct, a Western myth forged, nurtured, and exploited, over the last twenty-five centuries, by geographers and historians, explorers and travelers, poets, publishers, tourist operators, and other vested interests. A myth, indeed, whose survival is guaranteed by the same forbidding environmental conditions which, in the Sahara as at the Poles, prevent most forms of life from surviving.

Among the various opinions and beliefs shaped by Saharan mythmaking (some of which did not pass the test of time, while others persist today as they fit in the contemporary purposes of the myth) is the idea of the desert as a formidable barrier to human communication and cultural exchange. A geographical feature, largely devoid of cultural or historical meaning. Rooted in the “long-held bias, classical Greek and Roman as well as modern European, against any thought that the Sahara might once have been a cradle of civilization” (Abdelaziz in Werner, 2004), such ideas long shaped popular views of the great desert while also affecting scholarly research, to the point that:

“Until recently there has been, as far as the writing of history is concerned, an almost unabridged gulf between North Africa and the rest of the continent. Historians either studied Africa south of the Sahara, or Africa north of the great desert. The latter was considered to be part of the Muslim Middle Eastern world, or part of the Mediterranean world; but not part of Africa historically speaking” (Atmore, 1970, 61-2).

In spite of the progress made in the last three decades by African history, to some extent Atmore’s point remains valid today. For most scholarly purposes, in fact, Africa continues to be divided between two distinct academic fields: Islamic and Near (or Middle) Eastern studies, which covers North Africa; and African studies, which deals with sub-Saharan Africa properly. Since, depending on the inclusiveness of the concept, North Africa may or may not include the great desert, we can see how the latter, rather than belonging firmly to either of these two fields, remains in a sort of interdisciplinary limbo and, in spite of the significant amount of overlap and collaboration, can still represent a chasm between them. At first, such academic distinction between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa seems to be based on cultural and linguistic factors; but since Islamic Africa expands well beyond the geographical limits of North Africa, we realize that what actually splits the continent between two different academic fields is the Sahara itself, or rather the old bias which sees it as an immense solitude of sands, of little or no interest for the historian or the archeologist.¹

¹ A significant effort to fill this gap is represented by the Saharan Studies Association (www.ssa.sri.org), founded in 1992 by “a body of scholars with common interests associated with the African Studies Association in the United States.”

The Sahara represents indeed a formidable barrier, although not an insuperable one. In the words of the Senegalese poet and statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor, “the Sahara is an ocean of sand which merchants and explorers managed to cross long before they were able to negotiate the high seas. In fact this huge expanse of rock and sand, stretching from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, so as to give the impression of an insuperable barrier between the Mediterranean and Black Africa, has for two thousand years connected peoples culturally and geographically distant who would communicate along caravan routes” (Gaudio, 2002a).

These caravan routes were the lifelines of the trans-Saharan trade, which long predated the Arab invasion of North Africa and defined the economic, political, and cultural life of a large part of the African continent until the end of the nineteenth century. By overcoming the natural barrier of the desert, these routes promoted commercial exchanges between Africa, Europe, and Asia, which in turn led to political and cultural relations among the various peoples involved.

By the sixteenth century, when the trans-Saharan trade entered its golden age, a number of trading centers strategically located at the end or the intersection of the main routes had grown into prominent cultural hubs. Their position and the increasing demand for African goods (the latter largely generated by European and American markets) made them part of a vast commercial network extending to the limits of the known world. Products coming from as far as Persia, India, or China were bought and sold in Timbuktu, Chinguetti, or Sijilmasa; while Ghanaian gold shone in the workshops and the courts of Europe, and Italian paper was used by calligraphers and copyists from Fez to Kano. This period of economic and intellectual prosperity lasted three hundred years at most; by the middle of the nineteenth century all main commercial arteries were drying up, most trading centers had entered a long-term decline marked by progressive isolation and decay, while the desert was swallowing up their vestiges of past wealth. This process continues today, as all efforts to revitalize these ancient caravan towns are frustrated by the increasing desertification of the Sahara and the consequent displacement and urbanization of its nomadic tribes.

If the trans-Saharan trade has been largely overlooked by historians and archeologists alike, it is because the majority of them continues to study “Africa north of the Sahara, or Africa south of the great desert,” while the great desert itself remains, for most scholarly pursuits, a no-man’s-land between Near Eastern and African studies. An example of this interdisciplinary gap is the research in the trade between West Africa and the Atlantic world, a topic that has been traditionally dominated by European and North American scholars, interests, and issues (particularly slavery, abolitionism, and African American heritage). For decades studies focused either on gold and slaves (the two African commodities that were most demanded on European and American markets), or on the Gold Coast, as it played such a prominent role in the transatlantic slave trade that, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the control of its ports had become a serious issue for European players.

But gold and slaves were exported through Maghribi ports as well (particularly Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers), and the only way to attain them from the gold- and slave-rich lands south of the Sahara was through the desert itself. Moreover, from an African

point of view, slaves and gold were only two of the many goods carried across the sands, and not even the most valuable ones. Slaves for example, while highly perishable, were less scarce and reputedly less profitable than gold, salt, or books — the latter being the most profitable merchandise to be found in Timbuktu, according to Leo Africanus who visited the town in 1510 (1956, 468–69). Similar observations by other Muslim travelers confirm the importance of books and book products (particularly paper) in the trans-Saharan trade, as they attest to the flourishing of traditional book arts such as calligraphy, illumination, and binding along the main caravan routes.

The Trans-Saharan Book Trade and the Birth of Desert Libraries

When, in the first half of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese emissaries of Henry the Navigator made their way to the Sahara's southern shore from the Atlantic coast, they discovered that its markets had been reached, for a thousand years at least, by caravans of camels crossing the desert on a regular basis and along well-established routes. The trans-Saharan trade dates back to prehistoric times, although it is virtually impossible, based on historical documents and the archeological record, to fathom its nature and extent before the seventh-century Arab invasion of North Africa.

The Greek historian Herodotus, in his description of Libya (*i.e.*, North Africa), written in the fifth century B.C. and based on information collected during a sojourn in Cyrenaica, identifies four distinct physical regions: a coastal area inhabited by nomadic pastoral tribes; a region where “wild beasts are found”; a “great belt of sand, stretching from Thebes in Egypt to the Pillars of Heracles”; and a “waterless desert, without rain or trees or animal life, or a drop of moisture of any kind.” Along the great belt of sand, “separated from one another by about ten days’ journey, are little hills formed of lumps of salt, and from the top of each gushes a spring of cold, sweet water. Men live in the neighborhood of these springs — beyond the wild beasts’ region, they are the furthest south, towards the desert, of any human beings” (Herodotus, 1972, 331–3). About thirty days’ journey west of Thebes lies the oasis of the Garamantes, from which is the shortest route — another thirty days’ journey — to the Lotophagi of the coast. The Garamantes, relates Herodotus, “hunt the Ethiopian hole-men, or troglodytes, in four-horse chariots,” a peculiarity that generated much speculation about the ethnic identity of both peoples and the use of horses and oxen in the central Sahara before the introduction of the camel.

While some hypotheses about the latter issue have been substantiated, if not confirmed, by the archeological findings of the last century (particularly rock carvings and paintings), it was the introduction of the camel, in the first or second century A.D., that created the conditions for economic, political, and cultural development in North and West Africa (Bulliet, 1975, 111–40). A far more environmentally-resistant riding and pack animal, the camel gave the Berber tribes who lived on the northern fringes of the great desert more mobility and power, allowing them to extend their influence over a vast territory, virtually reaching as far south as the Senegal River, and to establish regular routes between the oases of the Mediterranean hinterland and the trading centers of western Sudan.

The existence of a few, well-established and far-reaching routes allowed the followers of the Prophet, after their blitz conquest of Mediterranean Africa in the seventh century, to penetrate farther south in search of gold and other valuable goods. By the eleventh century, when the second and far more consequential wave of Arab invaders reached Morocco, at least four camel routes crossed the central and western Sahara in a north-south direction, with a number of trails connecting them at different latitudes. Their itinerary and their stops were defined by the presence of water or salt, Sahara's most valuable resources and the only capable of transforming a palm grove into a trading post or even — depending on a number of geopolitical and cultural factors — an important commercial and intellectual center.

The easterly route connected Tripoli to Gao (on the middle Niger, about 200 miles downriver from Timbuktu) via Ghadames and Ghat in the Libyan desert. The central went from Sijilmasa, in the southern Moroccan oasis of Tafilelt, to the salt mines of Route Taghaza and Taodeni, in the northernmost corner of Mali, and from them to Oualata (western branch) or Timbuktu (eastern branch). The western route ran from Sijilmasa to the Almoravid capital of Awdaghost and the gold-producing Ghana empire via Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichittt, and Oualata, from where an eastern branch led to the Niger River and Timbuktu.

In addition to salt, which was — and, to some extent, continues to be — mined locally, the main products traveling from the Maghrib, Spain, Italy, Egypt or further east to western Sudan included leather, cloth, paper, and books, while those crossing the desert in the opposite direction were primarily gold dust, slaves, ivory, ostrich feathers, raw leather, civet, and civet cats.

For centuries before the Europeans started to penetrate the markets of the interior, the only accounts of the trans-Saharan trade (and West African life in general) were provided by Muslim travelers, historians, geographers, and chroniclers. Some of them, like Ibn Hawqal in the tenth century, Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth, and Leo Africanus in the sixteenth, traveled extensively and based their narratives on first-hand information, while others, such as the eleventh-century geographer Al-Bakri, who never left his native Cordova, relied exclusively upon oral or written sources.

The Arab conquest of North Africa and the spread of Islam to western Sahara and Sudan affected all aspects of life in the region, although probably none as deeply and significantly as intellectual and cultural life. The diffusion of Arabic as a *lingua franca* (the Latin of Africa, as it has been aptly called) gave a considerable impulse to diplomatic, commercial, and cultural exchanges within West Africa and beyond, with the rest of the Islamic world (which at the time, stretching from Spain to Central and South Asia, included the better part of the known world) and with Christian Europe as well. Moreover, the introduction of a rational, functional, and visually appealing writing system provided local peoples with a new and revolutionary way to record, store, and disseminate information, not only in Arabic but also in their native languages (particularly Hausa, Peul, and Wolof). All kinds of practical, intellectual, and spiritual knowledge that until then had been the object and prerogative of oral tradition could now be transferred and disseminated via the written word. Such a paradigm shift had major economic, social, and cultural consequences, one of them being the transition to

a labour-intensive, technologically-driven, and market-dependent approach to knowledge and information management. By turning communication into a medium, writing created the conditions for a significant upgrade from technique to technology, and from artistic ability to technical specialization. What in the oral tradition had been accomplished through the mnemonic and performing skills of the griot, now required specific materials (paper, ink, leather, glue), arts (writing, penmanship, illumination), and services (copying, bookmaking, bookselling). During the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, the growing demand for, and increasingly organized supply of, these materials, skills, and services led to the development of a distinct trans-Saharan book trade and the flourishing of book arts and crafts along the main caravan routes. Paper in particular became as valuable as salt or slaves (the two top commodities of the trans-Saharan trade), especially after the eleventh century, when it replaced parchment, and even more after the introduction of Italian paper in the thirteenth, which significantly raised the standards of quality for this type of material. Paper was more practical to use but also more difficult to recycle since, unlike parchment, it could not be scraped and overwritten; besides, it came from farther away than parchment, salt or slaves (all North or West African commodities), and it was more perishable than any of them. The demand for specific services and skills generated by the trans-Saharan book trade gave rise to professional figures such as copyists, scribes, calligraphers, illuminators, bookbinders, and booksellers. Some of them were highly regarded and well-remunerated,² while others had a more entrepreneurial profile that required a combination of business acumen, managerial skills, and cultural awareness. Booksellers would often combine the functions of “publisher,” dealer, and collector, maintaining a workshop of calligraphers, illuminators, and binders, while also sending agents to various parts of West Africa to buy or copy works.³ Books manufactured and traded along the main caravan routes were mostly of two kinds: fine editions of important works (particularly the Koran), elegantly laid out, calligraphed, illuminated, and bound; and cheaper copies of works used for instructional or reference purposes and produced with economy of means. The latter were often carried around on camelback, in leather saddlebags specifically made for this purpose, and used for nomadic schooling in traditional institutions known as *mahadras* (Ould Ahmedou, 2000). Books were collected and treasured by scholars, holy men, and their families, as well as by religious institutions such as mosques, *zawyas* (“monasteries”), and *madrasas* (“colleges”). Individual collections passed from one generation to the next according to

² “A good calligrapher ... could receive up to twelve camels for each copied manuscript. Consequently a library gave cultural and economic prestige to the family who owned it” (Alunno in Frederici, 2002, 12).

³ The practice of acquiring manuscripts by sending buyers and copyists to faraway places continued well in the twentieth century. In 1945 the private collection of the Moroccan Ahmed Boularaf, who for half a century (1907–55) was Timbuktu’s main bookseller, numbered 6,039 books and 2,075 manuscripts, the latter mostly collected in the way described above (Akmir, 2002, 183).

a well-established patrilineal system, while institutional libraries were formed by direct acquisitions as well as by charitable gifts known as *waqf* (pl. *awqaf*). The trans-Saharan trade started to decline in the late eighteenth century and by the middle of the twentieth had all but dried up. One of the main causes was the competition of transatlantic commerce, which had grown consistently in the two hundred years following the discovery of the Americas; another was the increase of commercial navigation along the west coast of Africa, which provided a safer and faster alternative to the long journeys across the desert (whose success or failure depended on the local tribes, while maritime commerce was managed and controlled by European players). A third cause was the growth of French colonial power in the region and the consequent dismantlement of the political and economic system that had shaped traditional life for centuries. (Tribal nomadism and trans-Saharan trade long predate the invasions of Islamized Arabs, who skillfully exploited and built upon the political and economic realities they found without undermining their fundamental aspects.) This turned out to be particularly detrimental in Mauritania, where a ten-year long (1895–1905) military campaign in the north, followed by an administrative reorganization and the transfer of political and economic powers to the coast, further contributed to the isolation and decline of the towns in the interior, whose economic and cultural survival depended on their strategic position along the main caravan routes.

Mauritania: One of the Better-Kept Secrets in the World of Islamic Scholarship

Extending from the Maghrib to Western Sudan, and crossed by the westernmost of the trans-Saharan routes, Mauritania was always an important link between Mediterranean and Black Africa. Following the Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries, it played a critical role in the spread of Islam to West Africa and the consequent flourishing of a quintessentially Saharan form of ascetic mysticism, shaped by the extreme conditions of the desert and the patterns of nomadic life. The scholarly and literary tradition that grew out of it is documented by an impressive manuscript heritage (close to 40,000 according to official estimates) representing over three hundred years of book production and collecting in a region where such activities are hard to imagine and even harder to record.

Geographical distribution, provenance, and antiquity of the manuscripts

Historically, most manuscript-rich areas of Mauritania were located along two main axes, one running in an east-west direction along the Senegal River, in the south of the country, and the other represented by the trans-Saharan route linking the markets of western Sudan to the oases of southern Morocco. It was along this western route that, between the twelfth and the thirteenth century A.D., a number of *ksour* (a Berber word for “village”) were founded by Islamized Berber groups, typically at such a distance from each other that could be covered within a reasonable amount of time.⁴ Some of

⁴ The itinerary Ouadane-Chinguetti-Rachid-Tidjikja would take 10–13 days, and the next leg, Tidjikja-Tichitt-Oualata, another two weeks (Ould Khalifa, 1998, 329–30; Fall, *et al.*, 2000).

them remained mere “filling stations,” while others like Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tidjikja, Tichitt, and Oualata grew to become major commercial and intellectual ouposts. In time Chinguetti (Shinqit) acquired such a prominence and distinction that by the end of the eighteenth century it was known throughout the Islamic world as the spiritual and intellectual capital of Mauritania (a reputation that has lasted to this day, together with the status of seventh holiest city of Islam), and the name of Bilad el-Shinqit (“Chinguettiland”) was used to indicate the entire country between Morocco and the Senegal River. This was mostly due to the town’s many distinguished scholars and holy men, to the number of students and disciples these attracted from all parts of Islamic Africa and beyond, to the wide range of Islamic sciences they taught, and to the vast libraries they established to support their teaching and study.

Most private libraries were established between the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, and combine manuscripts, printed books, and archival materials.⁵ With a few remarkable exceptions, manuscripts date from the eighteenth century onward and, if not copied locally, were acquired in North Africa, Spain, or the Middle East during trips that combined religious, political, and commercial purposes.⁶ Printed books are less scarce than one would assume, and in some collections outnumber the manuscripts. For the most part, they were printed in Morocco, Cairo, or Istanbul from the latter part of the nineteenth century onward. Archival materials are typically represented by family papers, correspondence, diplomatic, legal, and commercial documents such as deeds of sale, agreements, and certificates.

Current repositories and main collections

While many collections are still housed in private homes, mosques, and *zawyas*, these are being increasingly replaced by institutional repositories built right after the

⁵ Among the oldest are the Ahl Fadil and the Maktabat al-Awqaf in Tichitt, both established in the seventeenth century A.D., the Ould Habott (est. 1782) and Ould Hamuni (ca. 1820) in Chinguetti, the Shaykh Sidiyya in Boutilimit (ca. 1826), and the Ahl al-Aqil in Mederdra (1829) (Simon-Khedis, 1994).

In Chinguetti, the Ahl Muhammad Salih wuld al-Hanshi collection (est. 1863) contains manuscripts dating back to the fourteenth century A.D., while the library of the scholar Muhammad wuld Habat (1748–1868) includes, among other old and rare works on astrology, mathematics and traditional medicine, a ninth century theological work by Abu Hilal al-Askari, which is the oldest Arabic manuscript known to exist in Mauritania.

In Tichitt the oldest manuscripts are in the already-mentioned Ahl Fadil and Maktabat al-Awqaf collections (Simon-Khedis, 1994, 304–05).

⁶ “The world of Islam revered knowledge, and stressed the virtues of pilgrimage. Knowledge acquired abroad was preferred to the home product, and the aspiring scholar would migrate from one famous law school to another, keeping open regular links between Fez, Meknes, Tlemcen, Tunis, Kayrawan, Cairo and places further to the east” (Oliver and Atmore, 2001, 33). Similarly, says the great historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun, “merchandise becomes more valuable when merchants transport it from one country to another” (Khaldun in Oliver and Atmore, *ibid.*). Books and manuscripts, being embodied knowledge and merchandise at the same time, provide excellent examples of these two statements.

independence, as well as by more recent — and conversationally correct — “manuscript centers.” In her 1994 survey, Geneviève Simon-Khedi lists about forty libraries with holdings ranging from ten to six thousand items each. Only three are public institutions, but their combined holdings are almost as large as those of all the private libraries together (this being the natural result of their institutional mission, their national scope, and their collecting policies). Most private libraries hold between fifty and two hundred items, and those with more than one thousand bring together several collections representing one or more families. These are the Ahl al-Imam ‘Abd al-Mumin library (with 3,000 manuscripts) and the Maktabat al-Awqaf (2,000) in Tichitt, the Shaykh Sidiyya family library in Boutilimit (ca. 2,000), the Ould Habott library in Chinguetti (ca. 1,400), and the Sidi Ibn al-Tah library in Abar al-Atrous (ca. 1,000). At least two collections, the already-mentioned Ahl al-Imam ‘Abd al-Mumin in Tichitt and the much smaller Sidi ‘Abd Allah wuld Hajj Ibrahim in Tidjikja, were established in the 1980s as religious endowments (*awqaf*).

The two largest institutional collections are those of the Institut Mauritanien de la Recherche Scientifique (IMRS), established in 1975 under the Ministère de la Culture et de la Recherche Scientifique, and the Institut Scientifique d’Enseignement et de Recherches Islamiques (ISERI), founded in 1978 as part of the Ministère de la Culture et de l’Orientation Islamiques. Both are located in the Mauritania’s capital of Nouakchott. The IMRS holds about 6,000 manuscripts representing 72 collections, mainly from the Trarza region in the southwest, while the ISERI combines several collections for a total of about two thousand manuscripts in Arabic and Hassaniyya. Most libraries are open to students, teachers, and researches upon application; in a few cases (*e.g.*, the ISERI) credentials are requested.

Physical characteristics: support materials, writing tools, bindings

The oldest surviving manuscripts in Mauritania are on parchment made from the skin of sheep, goat, or gazelle, a material that in the Maghrib and western Sahara was used until the eleventh century A.D., when in other parts of the Islamic world had been largely replaced by paper made from rags of linen and hemp (in Egypt, for example, the transition followed almost immediately the introduction of papermaking in the tenth century). This delay was not due to the unavailability of the new material, which in North Africa had been known since the ninth or the tenth century and manufactured at least since the eleventh, but rather to the fact that “the provinces of Ifriqiya (corresponding to modern Tunisia) and Sicily were centers of sheep raising, and the manufacture of leather and parchment, as well as the exports of hides, remained an important industry” (Bloom, 2001, 85).

Paper used in western Sahara was produced elsewhere — in Egypt, the Maghrib, Spain, and Italy — and traveled by camel along the trans-Saharan routes, together with salt, gold, leather, slaves, and a number of other trading goods. During the tenth and eleventh centuries papermaking spread from Egypt to the Islamic Far West (Maghrib and Spain), although in the next three hundred years Mediterranean and African markets were invaded by paper manufactured in north and north-central Italy (particularly in Fabriano, Treviso, Florence, Bologna, Parma, Milan, and Venice) and

exported by Genoese and Venetian merchants. Such a commercial success was due to a combination of technological developments and marketing skills, which made Italian paper available in larger quantities and more sizes than muslim paper, thus satisfying the growing needs of North African chancelleries. From the time it was introduced to the decline of the trans-Saharan trade in the nineteenth century, paper in West Africa remained one of the most precious and expensive goods, and as such it was variously recycled and treasured in ways that European travelers quickly learned how to exploit.⁷ While the pen remained essentially the same tool cut from a piece of reed (thence the name *qalam*, from the Greek word for “reed”) for the entire course of Islamic calligraphy, the transition from parchment to paper affected the type of ink used by calligraphers, scribes, and copists. The brownish ink (*hibr*), prepared with gallnuts and traditionally used on parchment, proved too acidic and corrosive for paper, and it was eventually replaced by black ink (*midād*) made from lampblack bound with gum arabica. This became the standard from India to Morocco, although recipes may vary from region to region and from author to author.⁸

More technologically complex was the art of Islamic bookbinding, of which Mauritanian libraries provide a number of excellent — although rapidly deteriorating — examples. Following the Arab invasions of North Africa, the principal material of this art, leather, gave rise to a flourishing local industry, whose products and know-how rapidly spread south along the main caravan routes, as well as north through Spain and across the Mediterranean. Throughout the golden age of trans-Saharan trade, large tanning works in the Maghrib supplied the markets of Western Sudan with the raw material for a variety of leather products, some of which are still manufactured today by the Berbers, Moors, and Tuareg of western Sahara. In addition to the leather from Morocco and other tanning centers of the Islamic world, some distinctive characteristics of Arab bookbinding are the cover boards made of several leaves of paper pasted together to increase the flexibility of the cover, the flat spine, the quires sewn without support, usually with linen or flax thread on two or four stations and a basic link stitch. In western Sahara, leather was also used to make richly decorated sleeve cases to protect the books from the sand and to carry them around, especially on camelback.

As pointed out by Marco Sassetti (1999, 33), an Italian book conservator with extensive experience of Mauritanian materials, all major formal aspects of a manuscript,

⁷ René Caillié, for instance, mentions several occasions in which single sheets of paper were used as a form of payment and much appreciated by the natives. See R. Caillié, *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo and Across the Great Desert, to Morocco, Performed in the Years 1824-1828*, vol. 1 (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1968), 306, 310, 325, 446 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁸ One of the most informative and influential sources on this topic is the North African Ibn Badis (1007–61), whose treatise on the technology of bookmaking provides not less than sixty recipes to make black ink, including solid inks for travelers and traveling scribes. Martin Levey’s edition (1962) includes also a translation of Abu’l-Abbas al Sufyani’s “Art of Bookbinding and of Gilding,” written in 1619. On the manufacture of black ink in the Islamic world during the middle ages, see also Zerdoun Bat-Yehouda (1983, 123–141; 237–243).

including the quality of the paper and the binding, can be affected by its origin and intended use. Those produced by specialized ateliers, working under commission or for the general market, present a more formal and refined approach to layout, calligraphy, and decoration. The lines tend to be more generously spaced and the margins wider, the text is in canonical handwriting and the illuminations are polychrome (sometimes with traces of gold), and the overall look of the page shows a sense of “design” that is lacking in the more sparing manuscripts meant for personal use or practical purposes such as teaching, practice, or preservation.

Language, alphabet, scripts

The majority of manuscripts are written in Arabic, some in Hassaniyya (the Arabic dialect spoken in Mauritania), and a few in Peul (Pulaar, Fulani), Songhai, Hausa, and other Western Sudanic languages transcribed using the Arabic alphabet. At least two libraries, the Ould Habott in Chinguetti and the Dar al-Makhtutat in Oualata, contain also Persian manuscripts (Simon-Khedis, 1994, 291, 304). Texts written in North Africa and western Sahara use the Maghribi (“Western”) script, a cursive hand developed in twelfth-century Libya from the much older Kufic script; however, depending on a number of geographical and cultural factors (provenance of the manuscript, where the author or copyist learned his art, etc.), they show a variety of calligraphic styles, notably Fasi (from Fez), Qayrawani (from Kayrawan), Saharan, Sudanic, Suqi, and Oriental (Middle Eastern).

Intellectual content

Most traditional libraries in Mauritania group a number of private collections formed over the last two centuries through family or scholarly inheritance. Depending on their origin and evolution, the size of these libraries — some of which reflect the specific interests of a single scholar, while others represent the collecting efforts of several generations, or members, of a same family — may range from a few dozen to a thousand items or more. Whatever their origins and extent, however, their composition usually reflects a broad range of intellectual interests and scholarly subjects. These are obviously dominated by religious (theological, juridical, canonical, and hagiographical) works, although history, geography, language, literature, science (mathematics, astronomy, medicine), and traditional knowledge are represented as well. As already mentioned, many collections also include private and public correspondence, records of commercial transactions, and other archival documents whose historical and anthropological significance, although still overshadowed by books and literary materials, is being increasingly recognized by scholars and owners alike.

Although most known libraries have been surveyed over the past ten years, only a few handlists, inventories, and catalogs exist to give an overview of their subject and percent composition. The first to receive inventorial attention was the one established by Shaykh Sidiyya “al-Kabir” in the 1810s and reviewed by Louis Massignon a century later. In his article for the *Revue du Monde Musulman*, Massignon divides the 1,195 works listed by his “field contact” in thirty subjects. These include: Koranic exegesis (*tafsir*), tradition (*hadith*), dogmatics (*kalam*), mysticism (*tasawwuf*), fundamentals of the law

(*usul*), philology (morphology, rhetorics, lexicography), poetry works (*dawawin*), prose works (*adab*), prosody (*'urudh*), history (*tarikh*), travel narratives (*akhbar*), eschatology, medicine (*tibb*), courtesy books, physiology of the couple (*nisa' wa tazwidj*), magic (*khawass*), oneirocriticism (interpretation of dreams), mathematics and astrology, and logic (*mantiq*) (Massignon, 1909, 410–411). In percentage, they are: jurisprudence (30%), traditions of the Prophet (16%), mysticism (13%), theology (12%), Arabic language (10%), Koran (8%), and literature (7%); the remaining 4% being represented by invocation and rogations, history logic, ethics, biography, science (mathematics, astrology and astronomy), medicine, “hidden things,” encyclopedias, pedagogy, and geography.

About eighty years later, after being dispersed and recomposed, the Shaykh Sidiyya library was surveyed and microfilmed by Charles C. Stewart of the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. The resulting catalog lists the following subject categories: Arabic (calligraphy, grammar, lexicography, morphology, philology, phonetics, rhetoric), biography, calendar, economy, ethics, *hadith* (and *sunna*), hidden meanings (charms, talismans), history, jurisprudence, libraries (book lending), literature, logic, medicine, mysticism, pedagogy, politics, Prophet Muhammad, Qu'ran, science (arithmetic, astronomy, chemistry, classifications, gunpowder manufacture, human body), society, and theology (Stewart, 1994).

Another fundamental resource, Ulrich Rebstock's catalog of Arabic manuscripts in Mauritania (1989), contains a brief description of 2,239 works and a subject index listing 129 categories, each one followed by the number of relative titles and their percentage. The fifteen largest categories are the following: *fiqh* or jurisprudence (652 titles or 28.12%), *tasawwuf* or mysticism (195 or 8.77%), *adab* or prose (141 or 6.34%), *tarikh* or history (118 or 5.31%), the Koran (112 or 5.04%), *tawhid* or principles of oneness of God (109 or 4.90%), *sira* or biography (85 or 3.82%), *nahw* or grammar (81 or 3.64%), *luga* or language (76 or 3.42%), *munawwa'at* or miscellaneous (55 or 2.47%), *tarajim* or translations (51 or 2.29%), *usul* or principles (48 or 2.16%), *kunnash* (35 or 1.57%), *mantik* or logic (27 or 1.21%), and *hadith* or traditions (26 or 1.12%).

Not surprisingly, these subject lists and percentages of titles show a significant relationship between the nature and scope of the most comprehensive collections and the main areas of religious, linguistic, and scientific instruction which, until recently, formed the traditional curriculum of the Moorish tribes of monastic tradition in Mauritania:

“On commence à instruire l'enfant dès l'âge de cinq ans. Après lui avoir appris l'alphabet, on lui enseigne le Qorân; puis l'orthographe du Qorân, d'après des textes locaux ou étrangers; ensuite, la théologie, le droit et la mystique. Au sujet de ces trois sciences religieuses, on étudie d'abord des résumés composés par des auteurs du pays et étrangers et, suivant le désir ou l'intelligence de l'élève, on passe à des textes plus vastes. On enseigne ensuite les autres matières : l'histoire du Prophète, la langue arabe à l'aide de poèmes choisis, la grammaire, la morphologie, l'art métrique, la rhétorique, la logique, la médecine, l'arithmétique, etc. ... ; on étudie très peu l'astronomie ou l'astrologie. En chaque matière, l'élève a à étudier des textes choisis composés par des étrangères ou les savants du pays ; l'élève ou le maître en fait la

sélection. Il y a des régions où l'on apprend, en général, toutes les matières, comme chez les habitants du Trarza et à Chinguetti, Walata, Tichit, Wadàn, Tidjikja, et d'autres où l'enseignement se borne au Qorân et au droit" (Ould Hamidoun, 1952, 49–50).⁹

"Formal schooling starts at the age of five. After learning the alphabet, children begin to study the Koran and its orthography on local as well as foreign texts; then come theology, law, and mysticism. These three religious sciences are studied first using primers written by local and foreign authors; afterwards, if they are interested and mature enough, students can move to more advanced texts. Other typical subjects are the life of the Prophet, Arabic language, grammar, morphology, prosody, rhetoric, logic, medicine, arithmetic, etc. Astronomy and astrology are very little studied. The study of each subject is conducted on texts written by local or foreign scholars, the selection being made by either the student or the teacher. In some areas, such as the Trarza region and the towns of Chinguetti, Oualata, Tichit, Ouadane, Tidjikja, all subjects are taught, while in others instruction is limited to the Koran and law."

For the historian of western Sahara, who in general cannot rely on other documentary sources (such as the archaeological record, oral tradition, and European accounts), these manuscripts are particularly important as they represent the only written materials available for the pre-colonial period. Moreover, their quantity, location, nature and provenance, as well as their codicological characteristics and physical conditions, provide an almost unique opportunity for the book historian, the conservator, and the curator to develop a comprehensive, integrated, and far-reaching conservation strategy. By taking advantage of what has been done in the field of manuscript cataloging and preservation, in the West as well as in Africa and the Middle East, such a strategy could successfully generate a knowledge base, if not a blueprint, for future initiatives concerned with similar materials in like environments. Until recently, in fact, most desert libraries have remained off-limits because of their geographical location and distribution, which complicated and frustrated all efforts to access, document, and protect them. Only in the last two decades have such efforts started to bear fruits. Their objects were to attract the amount and kind of scholarly attention they deserve, not only as historical and literary documents but also for the information they provide on a variety of topics, including book production and circulation in pre-colonial and colonial West Africa, forms of learning and transmission of knowledge, and the relationship between paper, books and other commodities in the trans-Saharan trade. Finally, these libraries represent Mauritania's most valuable cultural asset and, if properly preserved and protected, they can provide the key to the cultural and economic revival of many a dilapidated and destitute desert town.

⁹ For a discussion of traditional education vis-à-vis contemporary educational approaches and programs in Mauritania, see Ould Ahmedou (2000).

Colonial Scholarship: Between Intellectual Pursuit and Intelligence Work

As a result of the trans-Saharan book trade, a remarkable amount of manuscript and printed books survived in private and institutional repositories across North and West Africa. While European interest for this materials dates from the early twentieth century, no serious attempts to identify, collect, organize, and preserve them were made until after the end of French colonial rule in the early 1960s, and particularly in the last ten to fifteen years. Initially, such efforts focused on the manuscript-rich areas on both shores of the great desert — the intellectual centers and the oases of the Maghrib in the north and, at the other end, Senegambia, the Niger Bend (in and around Timbuktu), and the emirates of northern Nigeria — while the immense ocean of sands in between was rarely tapped. This is one of the reasons why, as late as 1982, a western scholar could refer to the “tradition of study and writing in Mauritania during the past three centuries [as] one of the better kept secrets in the world of Islamic scholarship and in the history of Muslim intellectual life in North and West Africa” (Stewart, *et al.*, 1992, 1).

The first Europeans to develop a serious interest in the Arabic manuscripts of Mauritania and western Sahara were, naturally enough, those who had more direct access to them, that is, French colonial administrators and the travelers who followed in their steps. The French military conquest of Mauritania — *la Pacification* — lasted from 1901 to 1934 and was far from pacific. A first attempt to win the Moors by diplomatic means (with the traditional offer of a choice between “cooperation with financial rewards or resistance with military consequences”) achieved only partial results, and only in the southern regions of Trarza, Brakna, Tagant, and Hodh. This and the assassination, in May 1905, of Xavier Coppolani, the French Commissioner who had been the architect and main proponent of a “peaceful penetration,” prompted the French administration to revise their strategy, and a series of military operations were launched to subjugate the northern half of the country. The campaign quickly escalated into a war that lasted five long cruel years, and ended only with the military conquest of the Adrar in the summer of 1909. The following, final phase was largely aimed at policing the conquered regions and lasted until 1934, when the French occupied the oases on the Moroccan and Algerian borders, put down the last major organized raid, and divided the entire northwestern Sahara in the three administrative districts of Takna, Rigaibat, and Moor (Gerteiny, 1967, 102–15).

One of the first political and religious leaders to accept the protection of the French was Sidiyya Baba (1860–1924), shaykh of the Qadiriyya Sufi order in the Trarza region and grandson of the scholar Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabir (1775–1868), who established one of the most important family libraries in West Africa. It was largely thanks to Sidiyya Baba’s *realpolitik*, and his personal relationship with Coppolani, that this famous collection was shown for the first time to Europeans and subsequently described in a scholarly journal *d’outre-mer*. While Colonel Gouraud was leading his *colonne de l’Adrar* to the conquest of Atar and Chinguetti, farther south, in the pacified Trarza region, another French officer managed to make significant progress of a different, more peaceful kind:

“*M. le commandant Gaden dont nous disions dernièrement à nos lecteurs l’utile et féconde activité scientifique, a bien voulu sur notre demande prier Cheikh Sidia de faire établir pour nous le catalogue de sa bibliothèque*” (Massignon, 1909).

“Mr. Gaden, whose valuable and productive scientific activities have already been described in these pages, has kindly asked Shaykh Sidiyya to compile an inventory of his library for us.”

Thus Louis Massignon (1883–1962), one of the most eminent orientalist of his time, begins his review of the Shaykh Sidiyya library in Boutilimit, whose appearance in the Parisian *Revue du Monde Musulman* of July 1909 represents the first published attempt, by a European scholar, to describe and assess the holdings of a traditional Saharan library. After dividing the 1,195 items in thirty subjects, Massignon points out the surprising prevalence of printed over manuscript texts (683 and 512, respectively); the strictly orthodox nature of the collection, dominated by theological, juridical, and doctrinal works; and the rigidly administrative and legislative bent of the first owner of this “bibliothèque maghrébine de type très accusé.” With the exception of a few works from Morocco, the books are mostly inexpensive editions published in Cairo and represent a remarkably accurate and judicious choice of the basic texts of Islamic theology and law. Among the manuscripts, Massignon describes a series of twenty-four works by two members of the Kunta (a scholarly lineage who played a major role in the islamization of West Africa), followed by a list of the most important titles within each of the main subject areas.

Massignon’s field contact was Henri Gaden (1867–1939), a military officer who took advantage of the opportunities offered him by various appointments in the colonial administration — including those of commissioner (1916–20) and lieutenant governor (1920–26) of Mauritania — to develop serious ethnological interests which eventually made him a specialist of the Fulani language (Métayer, 2003; Ricard, 2001). His “utile et féconde activité scientifique” is an example of the scholarly pursuits which, nurtured by years of experience in the field and a genuine passion for the local cultures, enhanced the career of many a colonial administrator and brought some of them, like the historian–ethnographer Maurice Delafosse (1870–1926) and the linguist Edmond Destaing (1872–1940), to the forefront of their respective disciplines. Other French military officers or colonial administrators who, in one way or another, were instrumental in drawing scholarly attention to the traditional libraries of Mauritania are Colonel (later General) Louis Archinard (1850–1932), whose substantial manuscript collection is now at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France; Paul Marty (1882–1938), who published a number of important works on Islam in Mauritania, including one describing 162 manuscripts from the library of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad b. Shaykh Ahmadu b. Sulayman in Mederdra;¹⁰ and, one Colonel Modat, who described various aspects of Adrar life and culture — including the contents of an important library in

¹⁰ Marty held various appointments in the colonial administration, including that of Chief du Service des Affaires Musulmanes.

Chinguetti — in a series of articles published between 1919 and 1922 in the newly-started *Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*.

One could argue that such scholarly interests on the part of many colonial administrators, no matter how genuinely pursued and scientifically motivated, in reality served more practical purposes, broadly defined by the constant need to access political and military information and to avoid diplomatic faux pas, misunderstandings, and deceptions.¹¹ The problem and a possible solution are articulated by Ismaël Hamet, a military officer and interpreter turned editor who, in 1911, published six manuscripts describing events that occurred in Mauritania between the end of the sixteenth century A.D. and the second half of the seventeenth century A.D. The manuscripts had been collected by Captain Jean-Baptiste Théveniaut (1870–1956) who, as administrator of the Trarza district in 1907–08, had established “des relations cordiales dans le monde des lettres musulmanes” in order to better pursue a genuine interest in the history, social organization, and religious practices of the local tribes. In his preface Hamet (1911, 12), commenting on the pitfalls of access to indigenous information, suggests the creation, throughout French Africa, of a network of military interpreters responsible for the collection, the study, and the translation of historical manuscripts and other records of local traditions.¹²

Barefoot Bretons and Bored Britons

The “pacification” of Mauritania, and the subsequent consolidation of French rule over its vast territory, made it a safer destination for new kinds of travelers and scholars. These were neither members of the armed forces nor civil servants, although they benefited from the presence of both, and until after the independence continued to be almost exclusively French.

Among the first to visit the Adrar region and its manuscript libraries were the biologist Théodore Monod, whose lifelong love affair with the Sahara is documented in such works as *Méharées* (1937) and *L'émeraude des Garamantes* (1984), and two rather unconventional *mademoiselles*, Odette Du Puigaudeau and Marion Sénones, who between 1933 and 1960 made five long trips to western Sahara, each time living for

¹¹ On the relationship between knowledge and power in French colonial Africa, see Emmanuelle Sibeud, *Une science impériale pour l'Afrique? La construction des savoirs africanistes en France, 1878–1930* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2002), and Agbenyega Adedze, “In Pursuit of Knowledge and Power: French Scientific Research in West Africa, 1938–65,” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, nos. 1–2 (2003): 335–344, <http://www.cssaame.ilstu.edu/issues/23/36.pdf> (accessed 28 September 2005).

¹² A quarter of a century after his death, Captain Théveniaut became, under the fictional name of Baculard d'Arnaud, the infamous protagonist of Louis Gardel's novel *Fort Saganne* (1980), which was later (1984) turned into a film directed by Alain Corneau and with Gerard Depardieu in the role of the protagonist. Although the events described in the novel took place in Algeria, the movie was filmed in Chinguetti, where a couple of years later the English traveler Michael Asher recorded the aftermath of this memorable experience in *Two Against the Sahara: On Camelback from Nouakchott to the Nile* (New York: William Morrow, 1988).

extended periods of time with their Moorish friends. The multiple interests and talents of these two women, combining scientific curiosity and artistic sensibility, allowed them to appreciate and describe their hosts' culture and lifestyle in a number of original travel books (written by Du Puigaudeau and illustrated by Sénones), which remain required reading for anybody interested in the region and its inhabitants. In the Spring of 1934, on their way to Adrar and Chinguetti, Du Puigaudeau and Sénones stopped in Boutilimit, capital of the southwestern Trarza district. Here Abdallahi Ould Shaykh Sidiyya, son of Sidiyya Baba, showed them the family library established by his great grandfather at the close of the eighteenth century, and subsequently described by Massignon and cataloged by Stewart:

“One of Abdallahi's suite took a heavy key which was hanging round his neck, went up the three crumbling steps and unlocked the door. Shutters were thrown open, and the evening sun lit up two bare and rather dilapidated rooms. In them were the wooden chests covered with leather, studded with heavy nails and bound with iron bands, which contained all the wisdom of Islam.

Hundred of rare books were there in sumptuous bindings: Moorish Korans and also Moroccan, Tunisian and Egyptian, and many books of philosophy, poetry, and law. Four generations of the family had laboriously collected them. There was a most precious Koran of the thirteenth century of which Abdallahi was particularly proud. It had been brought from Egypt by some of the disciples which his great-grandfather was constantly sending over all the Musulman world.

Abdallahi's disciples took the books out of the chests and pointed out to us the ornamental capitals and mystic illuminations. Their faces glowed with pride: all these books belonged to their beloved master, and it was for them as well as for him that they had left their families and their countries” (Du Puigaudeau, 1937, 95–96).

Du Puigaudeau's appreciation of the books and their custodians' reverential attitude towards them is clearly tainted by their poor storage conditions — a sweet and sour reaction typical of most Europeans who came after her. This is even more evident in Du Puigaudeau's unedited notebook entry for May 8, 1951, where a later visit to the same library, now housed in an “ugly grey hut” built by the French administration, is preceded by a poetic description of a *tikit*, the traditional igloo-shaped hut which serves as home and classroom of a local teacher:

“La hutte est tout en makeba entourée d'un large quadrillage de cordes de sbot. Elle est posée sur son socle de sable durci et le vent l'a entourée d'un haut croissant de sable rose” (Du Puigaudeau and Sénones, 2000, 89).

“The hut is made of *markeba* [a tall perennial grass, *Panicum turgidum*] surrounded by a large grid of ropes of *sbot* [another perennial grass, *Stipagrostis pungens*]. It sits on a base of hardened sand, surrounded by a crescent of pink sand created by the wind.”

In this living and learning space, where books are exposed rather than repositied as they still play an active role in the educational process,

“Une dizaine de talmid accroupis sur une natte apprennent la grammaire, lisant ou écrivant sur les louhas.

Des coffres plein de livres, des piles de livres sont rangés autour de la grand pièce ronde. Les parois de paille sont soutenues par une armature de branches entrecroisées, fixées à leur croisement par des cordes. Cette demeure a la beauté et la douceur d’un nid” (89–90).

“A dozen pupils squatting on a mat are learning grammar, reading or writing on their louhas [writing tablets].

Around the large, circular room are chests full of books and piles of books. The straw walls are supported by a structure of branches intertwined and tied by ropes. This home has all the beauty and the softness of a nest.”

In contrast, the French–built library is essentially a repository where the more precious volumes, sanctified as relics of a glorious past, are protectively although precariously stored away:

“Trois pièces exiguës, assez misérables, don’t une est fermée. Un talmidi ouvre les coffres de fer, nous montre de beaux livres anciens qu’il sort de leurs étuis de peau beige, mate comme du daim, ornés d’appliques ouvragées.

Je revois le beau Coran ancien qu’Abdellahi nous avait montré autrefois. Pour le manier, les gestes de Bou Mediana deviennent des caresses et, l’ayant refermé, il le pose contre sa poitrine, puis sur sa tête avant de le glisser dans sa gaine de peau” (90).

“Three cramped rooms, quite dingy, of which one is closed. A talmidi [pupil] opens the iron chests to show us some beautiful old books, which he takes out of their leather sleeves of a dull beige, like chamoix, and decorated.

I see again the beautiful old Koran which Abdellahi had shown us years ago. Bou Mediana handles the book as he were caressing it, and, after closing it, he holds it against his chest, then on his head before slipping it back into its leather case.”

The other important family library visited by the two Frenchwomen in 1937, on their second Saharan journey, is the one originally established one hundred and fifty years before by the Chinguetti scholar Sidi Muhammad Ould Habott, whose holdings are still valued today as the crown jewels of intellectual Mauritania:

“Treize cents ouvrages gainés de cuir colorié, frappé d’or, rapportés d’Afrique du Nord, d’Égypte, de Syrie, de Tombouctou, par des pèlerins et des messagers. En 1937, son gardien Mohammed Abdullah ould Ghulam avait en mon honneur sorti de leurs coffres tout le vieux Corans enluminés, tout ces livres de science et de poésie. Leur dernier propriétaire les avait légués en bien habous à la communauté de Chinguetti” (127).

“Three hundred works bound in coloured leather and stamped in gold, brought back from North Africa, Egypt, Syria, and Timbuktu by pilgrims and travelers. In 1937 its guardian, Mohammed Abdullah ould Ghulam, took all the illuminated Korans, and all the science and poetry books out of their cases for me to admire. Their last owner had bequeathed them to the community of Chinguetti.”

It is interesting to compare Du Puigauveau’s notes and comments with those of the English traveler Bruce Chatwin, who saw the Habott library in 1970 and left a memorably dismissive description of the entire experience:

“Passed to the open market to find a small black boy presiding over the dismembered remains of a camel — surely to be my bifeck tonight. Followed the small boy to the library — but the guardian was asleep. I will not wait till he is awake before leaving his courtyard house owned by a perfectly horrible woman who demanded presents and her equally unpleasant nephew who threatened to steal my camera unless I coughed up. Wall-eyed dragon with indigo-dyed face and hennaed nails.

The key to the famous Arabic library was found after promises of money by me preceded by affirmations that the proprietor was away in the bush. A pile of old Korans rapidly being reduced to fragments by dust and worm mouldered in a corner. Fine way to treat books. I could see no trace of the so-called Yellow-Eyed Koran — probably from the golden lozenge that decorated its cover” (Chatwin, 1993, 49).

Interestingly, while Du Puigauveau uses the juxtaposition of *tikit* and library to stress a contrast between the two places (one beautiful and soft as a bird nest, the other hard and dingy as a concrete prison), Chatwin’s idiosyncratic path from the market to the library invites a comparison between the dismembered remains of the camel and the pile of old Korans rapidly being reduced to fragments. And whereas Du Puigauveau’s guardian is portrayed as a sacristan, entirely devoted to his precious books, Chatwin’s “perfectly horrible woman and her equally unpleasant nephew” have the parasitic and predatory attitude of impoverished tribesmen used to feeding on the occasional tourist. While the conditions of the books — and the people in charge of them — may indeed have deteriorated in the three decades separating the Breton’s visit from the Briton’s, it is obvious that the comments of the latter have more to do with his unsympathetic attitude toward the place and its inhabitants, than with any particular preservation problems, no matter how serious they were.

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Downloaded on February 5, 2008, from:
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The original article appeared in *World Libraries* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 2004). The present version was reformatted without any textual change.

World Libraries (ISSN 1092-7441) is published twice a year by Dominican University Graduate School of Library and Information Science, River Forest, Illinois 60305 | T 708-524-6845 | F 708-524-6657 | E-mail worldlib@dom.edu
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The Book and the Sand: Restoring and Preserving the Ancient Desert Libraries of Mauritania — Part 2

Graziano Krätli

From travelog to catalog

Colonial scholarship produced a few tentative surveys of prominent libraries, a limited number of partial handlists, and a handful of reviews or translations of individual works, but made no serious and systematic attempt at mapping the manuscript territory it had discovered and started to explore. Travelers, on the other hand, offered a different and complementary view by describing visits to actual libraries, encounters with their owners and keepers, and life in the oasis towns where manuscript collections had been preserved for centuries. By giving these libraries a human face and a physical background, and by contextualizing and popularizing what had previously been confined to a few scholarly accounts, their narratives managed to add these new and uncommon “must-sees” to the travel maps and guides of western Sahara. More significantly, travel accounts laid the foundations of cultural tourism in Mauritania, which in the past ten years has seen a slow but steady growth, and to which the cultural and economic survival of the old caravan towns, as well as the future of the manuscript libraries themselves, appear to be increasingly linked.

A new incentive to emphasize the manuscript tradition as part of the cultural heritage of the country was provided by the movement for independence, which culminated in the creation of the new Islamic Republic of Mauritania on November 26, 1960. As early as 1949 the scholar Mokhtar Ould Hamidoun produced an inventory of the private libraries of Chinguetti (Gaudio, 1978, 82). Then in the early 1960s, with funding from UNESCO, he and Adam Heymowski of the Royal Library in Stockholm were able to conduct a country-wide survey, inventorying almost 2,000 works by 425 authors and estimating the existence of about 40,000 manuscripts. Their *Catalogue provisoire des manuscrits mauritaniens en langue arabe préservés en Mauritanie* (1965-66) was the first

extensive inventory of Islamic manuscripts produced in Mauritania, and one of the first initiatives of this kind conducted in West Africa. Like all pioneering projects carried out with limited means, it is simple and yet resourceful, with basic entries providing author and title (typed in Arabic), as well as Latin transcriptions of author names, handwritten in the margin.

An important step towards the creation of a national repository of manuscript collections was the establishment in 1975 of the *Institut Mauritanienne de Recherche Scientifique (IMRS)*, followed three years later by the *Institut Supérieur des Etudes et Recherches Islamiques (ISERI)*. In the first five years, thanks to the energetic collaboration between its director, Abdallahi Ould Boubacar, and the minister of culture, Ahmed Ould Sidi Baba, the *IMRS* acquired some three thousand manuscripts, which were more than doubled by 1995. This inspired the *ISERI* to implement a similar initiative in 1988, which secured an important collection of about two thousand items (Ould Maouloud, 2002, 340).

The great value and poor conditions of these newly acquired materials on one hand, and the lack of expertise and resources (both financial and technological) on the other, prompted the *IMRS* to seek foreign help to take proper preservation measures. This led to a fruitful collaboration with the University of Tübingen, in Germany, for the microfilming and cataloging of 2,239 manuscripts from over 260 collections throughout the country. Funded by the *Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation), the four-year long (1981–84) project was coordinated by Rainer Osswald, Ulrich Rebstock, and Ahmadu Ould ‘Abd al-Qadir, while the selection of the materials to be cataloged was based on a list compiled by the chief of the manuscript division at *IMRS*, Ahmad Ould Mohammed Yahya. The resulting microforms were deposited at the University of Tübingen, the University of Amman, Jordan, and the *IMRS* in Nouakchott, while the three-volume catalog was published in 1985 and re-issued in one volume in 1989 (Ould Cheikh, 1987).

The catalog is organized in a way that emphasizes conciseness and precision. Each entry is made of up to six descriptive fields identified by letters of the alphabet: A for “Author,” B for “Title,” C for “Subject,” D for “Date,” E for “Location,” and F for “Dimensions and Condition”. Four indexes (libraries, subjects, titles, and authors) complete the survey. The first two show, next to each entry, the number of corresponding works and their relative percentage. Manuscript collections (or individual owners/curators) are listed under place names (from Abdangay to az-Ziwan, for a total of 96 locations), while subjects are identified by their Arabic names transcribed in Latin characters (*e.g.*, Adab, Fiqh, etc.). The collaboration between Rebstock and Yahya continued over the years to produce other significant contributions, including a handlist of 1,109 items from twelve private collections (six in Chinguetti and six in Ouadane), and a catalog that describes fourteen private libraries in Nemah and Oualata.

Around the time Rebstock’s *Rohkatalog* was published, another foreign scholar was contacted by the Shaykh Sidiyya family with a request for assistance in the microfilming of their famous collection, both for preservation purposes and as a first step in the creation of a regional archive based in Boutilimit. A member of the

History Department of the University of Illinois, Charles C. Stewart, had been conducting research in Mauritania — and particularly in Boutilimit — since the late 1960s; he knew the Shaykh Sidiyya and had used their library to collect material for his doctoral thesis on “The Role of Shaykh Sidiyya and the Qadiriyya tariqa in southern Mauritania.”¹³

In June 1986 Stewart conducted a preliminary survey of the collection, to identify and quantify material for filming, and to separate manuscripts from printed books. Of the latter, three-quarters dated from the second decade of the twentieth century onwards and were not inventoried, while “all the manuscripts were set aside for microfilming, as was a small collection of early print (lithograph) materials that were deemed to be rare” (Stewart, *et al.*, 1992, 1). Between October 1987 and December 1989, with two grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, nearly 120,000 pages of material were microfilmed and subsequently indexed and cataloged. The microfilmed collection consists of 104 reels, of which two copies were returned to a member of the Shaykh Sidiyya family in Nouakchott and two are preserved at the University of Illinois. The bilingual (Arabic and English) catalog was created using a computer-based program especially developed for this project by Kazumi Hatasa of Purdue University (Stewart and Hatasa, 1989). Each of the 2,054 records “consists of a potential of 31 items descriptive of the manuscript, although it is rare that even half of these are utilized in a single record” (Stewart, *et al.*, 1992). Most entries, in fact, are made of a dozen or less basic fields, such as record and collection numbers, title (in Arabic only), author, known as (*i.e.*, familiar or common names), subject, form (prose, verse, or commentary), date (the year the manuscript was copied or published), owner (provenance), pages, dimensions (in centimeters), and miscellany (which may include information about the condition of the manuscript). Based on the information contained in these fields, computer-generated indexes were created for authors, subjects, nisbas (and author’s full names), known as (and author’s full names), recipients (of letters), copyists, scripts or languages, authors-subjects-forms, and subjects-forms-authors. The resulting four volumes (two of records, one of indexes, and one in Arabic), were produced by xerography in 1990 and distributed to twelve libraries in Mauritania and abroad (Stewart, 1991 and 1994).

In 1988–89, while the microfilming of the Shaykh Sidiyya Library was in progress, Stewart and his team used the same computer program, format, and indexing approach to catalog the manuscript collection of the *IMRS* in Nouakchott. Of this collection, which brings together 72 libraries mainly from the Trarza region in the southwest, Ahmad Ould Mohammed Yahya had maintained a careful handlist of acquisitions and compiled a list of titles of particular interest to historians (Yahya, 1987–1988). Produced and distributed in 1992–93, and in very much the same way as Stewart’s previous work, the 3,134-record, five-volume *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts at the Institut Mauritanienne de*

¹³ Discussed at Oxford University in 1970, the thesis provided the basis for *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania: A Case Study from the Nineteenth Century* (with E.K. Stewart, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), which remains Stewart’s major book-length contribution to the study of Islam in West Africa.

Recherche Scientifique represents a significant contribution to a general catalog of all Islamic manuscripts in Mauritania, of which it remains the largest and most substantial segment published to date.

Subsequently, Stewart's team developed a second version of the AMMS program which allowed them to add other catalogs and handlists of West African collections housed in Niamey, Niger, Paris, Timbuktu, and Evanston, Illinois, to their database, for a total of almost 20,000 records. Then, in the summer of 2002, after the project had been on hold for almost a decade, all of the 19,778 records were ported onto a Windows platform, the screen was redesigned, and, most significantly, a search engine was created that overcame many of the previous difficulties that had arisen from the diversity of input parameters. During the decade this project was on hold, new finds of manuscripts in private libraries in Mauritania and Mali continued apace, and the numbers of additional manuscripts now cataloged from "new" collections may well eclipse the number of initial entries in AMMSvers2 (Stewart, 2004). The Internet version of the database went live in the fall of 2004, and at the time of this writing remains the only catalog of Arabic manuscripts from West Africa to be accessible online.

A different, more encyclopedic initiative was launched in the late 1980s by the London-based Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation with the aim of assessing the contents, conditions, and accessibility of Islamic manuscripts wherever they are located. The World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts was implemented by commissioning country-specific handlists and catalogs, by training librarians and archivists, and by organizing conferences and seminars on issues pertaining to the conservation of Islamic manuscripts (Sharifi, 1994; Ibish and Atiyeh, 1996). The national catalogs were published in the early 1990s; each volume covers a number of countries (not necessarily from the same continent or region), and within each country individual repositories are listed alphabetically under their respective locations. The section on Mauritania "gives first-hand information about collections which have been seen personally" by the compiler, Geneviève Simon-Khedi, who, in spite of the "difficulty of access and research," was able to visit and describe 41 libraries in 14 different locations (Simon-Khedi, 1994, 281). Each entry gives the name of the collection and its owner or curator; the date of establishment; the status (private or public); the conditions of access (*e.g.*, on application); the total number of Islamic manuscripts; a description of its holdings (with information about its founder, provenance of the materials, and their actual condition); and, cataloging information (*e.g.*, published or unpublished catalogs, cataloging in progress, etc.). A chronological list of union catalogs and surveys adds important bibliographical information to what remains a useful and unique reference work.

Post-colonial prospects and prescriptions

A natural effect of the independence (and the consequent need to build institutional mass), the centralizing approach manifest in the attempt to create a national repository became increasingly difficult to justify and sustain when money started to dwindle and the *IMRS* lost its acquisition power. (A blessed impediment in this case, since it prevented most historical towns, already economically depressed, from losing their

only cultural asset and potential source of income.) This, and the growing dependence on international aid and cooperation, with its emphasis on sustainable development through the valorization of local resources, paved the way for an alternative and more sensible approach, based on the understanding that the manuscript libraries are part and parcel of their communities, where they play an important role as repositories of cultural identity and increasingly valuable assets in the tourist economy. Since the mid-nineties, this second approach has been implemented in either of two ways: by creating collective repositories in the major manuscript-rich towns, or by providing private owners with the financial and technical means to properly preserve their collections at home.

Collective repositories have been, or are in the process of being, established by transferring manuscripts from private homes to a central facility where they can be restored, preserved, stored, and accessed according to scientific principles of conservation. All private collections remain property of their owners, who retain their rights and control over them, while also playing an active role in the administration of the center. This solution was applied for the first time (and with mixed results) in Chinguetti, where private funding was provided by at least two European groups (the French *Fondation Rhône-Poulenc* and the Italian *Associazione Culturale "Giovanni Lorenzin"*), a plot of land was donated by the Habott Foundation, and an association of manuscript owners (*Nahda*) was specifically created to support and coordinate the initiative. After several exploratory missions sponsored by UNESCO or the European Union, and in spite of the diffidence and distrust of the local people, the building of the new manuscript center was finally undertaken in 2003. A similar initiative sponsored by the Spanish cooperation in Oualata, at the south-eastern end of the old Ouadane-Audaghost route, succeeded in bringing together seven private collections representing about thirty percent of all local manuscripts. But it succeeded only in part, and largely thanks to the support and active participation of Muhammad Nah Ould Abd al-Rahman, custodian of one of the largest private libraries in town, while two other major collections were kept out by their respective owners.¹⁴ In Tichitt, about 200 miles northwest of Oualata, a local notable built a facility to preserve the manuscript collections of his own clan, the Chorfa (Ould Maouloud, 2002, 342). When it was surveyed by Simon-Khedis in the early 1990s, the new Abd al-Mumin Library contained approximately 3,000 items, about one thousand more than the local *Maktabat al-Awqaf*, the municipal library whose holdings are charitable gifts (Simon-Khedis, 1994, 305).

More recently, Tichitt has been the beneficiary of two grants of \$16,000 each, awarded by the U.S. government through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, a program established by the Congress in 2001 "to provide direct small grant support to heritage preservation in less-developed countries." The first grant was "to build and equip a facility to house and preserve approximately 7,000 Islamic manuscripts

¹⁴ Located farther south and west, and closer to Timbuktu than to any other Mauritanian *ksour*, Oualata is geographically and culturally more Sahelian than Saharan. In terms of international cooperation, the town is considered more or less Spanish territory, since most research and preservation work, starting as early as the mid-1970s, was done by Spanish groups such as the *Foundation El legado andalusí* (Corral, 1985 and 2000).

documenting the history of Saharan trade during the Ghana empire.”¹⁵ The facility was inaugurated in August 2002.¹⁶

Of course there is a big difference between raising a building and starting an adequate preservation program, let alone ensuring its survival over time, and unfortunately many collective repositories planned so far seem to show the symptoms of a condition diffused among international cooperation projects: once the building is inaugurated and the collections are successfully transferred (if they are transferred at all), the envisioned center quietly and almost naturally atrophies into a storage facility, and the whole initiative rarely moves beyond this initial step in the conservation process. This certainly doesn't help to overcome the natural (and amply justified) suspiciousness and distrust of the manuscript owners, whose decision to grant the custody of their collections and become involved in the management of the new center is what, ultimately, determines the success or the failure of an initiative of this kind. Such decisions, to be sure, are often motivated by personal or political reasons which can be traced to historical rivalries among families and clans, a fact that outsiders don't always recognize or take into proper consideration.

The alternative approach represented by home conservation, in which technical advice and support are catered to individual libraries, is best represented so far by the *Réseau des Bibliothèques Traditionnelles de Tidjikja* (Tidjikja Traditional Libraries Network), a successful initiative implemented in this old caravan town midway between Chinguetti and Tichitt. Membership in the network requires three main commitments: to actively participate in the conservation of the manuscripts; to cooperate with catalogers and conservators; and, to make the resulting documentation available to researchers. On its part, the owners association provides technical equipment and know-how, and is also responsible for the creation of a “*centre du patrimoine*” for the management of technology and materials used in the conservation and restoration process (Ould Maouloud, 2002, 342–4).

The passage from the heroic phase of pioneer cataloging to a more comprehensive and strategic approach to conservation occurred in the mid-nineties, when a number of

¹⁵ The Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation 2001 Report, <http://exchanges.state.gov/culprop/afcp/report.pdf> (accessed 28 September 2005).

¹⁶ “*Signature d'un accord de financement entre le PSVPCM et l'ambassade des USA*”, AMI press release, 6 August 2002. It is worth mentioning that, since the inception of the program, funds were granted to support at least four other initiatives directly related to the preservation of Islamic manuscripts in North and West Africa. In 2001 and 2002, Mali received \$14,942 and \$25,000 to support, respectively, the “Day of the Book”, a public education initiative related to the Timbuktu Manuscripts Project, and the “The Ink Road/*Chemin de l'Encre*”, an international symposium “on the preservation, safeguarding, and applied research of ancient African and Islamic manuscripts.” In 2003 Niger received \$16,650 for the electronic preservation of a collection of more than 4,000 Islamic manuscripts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and Algeria was awarded \$17,550 for the preservation and documentation of the Zawiyat Ali bin Umar Manuscript Collection in Algiers, which includes over one thousand manuscripts from the eleventh to the eighteenth centuries. For a description of the program and individual projects, see <http://exchanges.state.gov/culprop/afcp/> (accessed 28 September 2005).

significant initiatives laid the foundations for projects to come. Between 1995 and 2000, the *Centre International de Recherches Sahariennes et Sahéliennes (CIRSS)*, a research center of the *Institut International d'Anthropologie (IIA)* in Paris, organized four international colloquia with the purpose of assessing the potential for cultural and economic revival in the Sahara, discussing appropriate development strategies, promoting awareness, and soliciting financial and technical assistance from national and international agencies.¹⁷ The proceedings were published in *Nouvelle Revue Anthropologique*, the journal of the *Institut International d'Anthropologie*, and later collected by Attilio Gaudio in *Les bibliothèques du désert* (2002).¹⁸

Contemporaneous with these conferences, two missions were undertaken to assess the contents and conditions of the private libraries in Chinguetti and Ouadane, and to plan a proper conservation strategy. The first was sponsored by the *Fondation Rhône-Poulenc* and organized by UNESCO in collaboration with the *Fondation Nationale pour la Sauvegarde des Villes Anciennes (FNSVA)*, which provided logistical support in the field. Over ten days (October 31 – Nov. 10) in the Fall of 1996, the French team visited 33 libraries and had the opportunity to assess about 3,450 items. A number of questions were asked of the owner or custodian of each library, to verify the nature of the ownership, the storage conditions, the approximate number of volumes, the physical conditions of the items, the availability and nature of inventories, the accessibility of the collections, the availability of a budget for acquisitions and collection management, and any collection development initiatives. Based on the information obtained, the

¹⁷ The first colloquium (Chinguetti, November 1995) focused on the ancient caravan towns. The second (Milan, May 1998), on the ancient manuscripts from Sahara and Sahel, was organized in collaboration with the *Centro Studi Archeologia Africana (CSAA)* and in conjunction with the opening of the photographic exhibition *Biblioteche del deserto* (“Desert Libraries”), the first ever to show Arabic manuscripts from Mauritania. The third, on the Mauritanian cultural heritage (Nouakchott, November 1999), passed a resolution to publish a “Saharan anthology” in five volumes, in French and Arabic, on the ancient caravan towns and their endangered libraries. This was followed, a year later, by a fourth colloquium held in Timbuktu and focused on the future of cultural tourism in the Sahara. The Milan exhibition was followed, three years later, by a more comprehensive traveling show entitled *Sahara: Antiche biblioteche del deserto. Esploratori italiani dimenticati* “Sahara: Ancient Libraries of the Desert, Forgotten Italian Explorers”), organized by the *Institut International d'Anthropologie* in collaboration with the *Centro Studi Archeologia Africana* and the Italian association *Itinerari Africani*. Based on iconographic and ethnographic materials, and accompanied by conferences and the projection of documentaries, it opened in July 2001 and toured a number of cities in northern and central Italy, including Turin, Milan, Verona, Ferrara, and Florence.

¹⁸ Attilio Gaudio (1930–2002) was a major force behind the efforts to promote scholarly and institutional interest for the desert libraries of Mauritania. Born in Italy, he spent most of his professional life as a correspondent in North Africa and professor of anthropology in Paris, where among other things he was director of the *Institut International d'Anthropologie*. His extensive knowledge of the peoples and civilizations of the Maghrib and western Sahara is documented in a number of books, a few of them specifically devoted to Mauritania and its cultural past. His premature death, in the summer of 2002, put a damper on the initiatives and the activities of the *CIRSS*, including the colloquia and the planned “Saharan anthology.”

team prepared a preliminary report which summarizes the findings and outlines three operational approaches consistent with the alternative between collective repository and home conservation (Arnoult, 2002).¹⁹

Less than two years later, the Italian non-governmental organization *Movimento Africa '70* undertook two missions to Chinguetti (May 24–31 and June 11–25, 1998) to assess the social, economic, institutional, and environmental situation of the town, and to prepare a municipal development plan focused on five interconnected and interdependent priority issues: water resources, sand removal, road maintenance, culture (*i.e.*, architecture and manuscript libraries), and tourism. The holistic approach and comprehensive scope of these two missions are reflected in the composition of the international team, which included a sociologist, a social economist, a head of technical services, three technical assistants (provided by the European Union and concerned with road maintenance, water resources, and sand removal), an architect, a book conservator, an expert of tourism development, and a tour operator. The preliminary report, *Étude de faisabilité d'un projet de développement communal à Chinguetti*, was submitted on June 25 to the Nouakchott office of the European Commission. A survey of fifteen libraries (the same visited by the *Rhône-Poulenc* mission in the Fall of 1996) allowed the book conservator, Marco Sassetti, to assess the physical characteristics of the manuscripts (age, watermarks, covers and binding, paper and ink, calligraphic aspects, etc.), to photograph a number of them, and to provide a diagnosis based on statistical and typological data. His observations and comments on the conditions of the manuscripts differ substantially from those of the *Rhône-Poulenc* team, which by comparison seem rather superficial and predictable, if not slightly prejudiced. Sassetti, in particular, notes that

Contrairement à l'opinion courante des visiteurs d'ailleurs, selon laquelle les manuscrits se trouveraient en état d'abandon à cause de la négligence des propriétaires, ... les susdits — compte tenu de conditions environnementales difficiles et de l'absence de moyens et de maîtrise des techniques — ont mis en place des actions de sauvegarde à de différents niveaux.

Contrary to the opinion of many visitors, who see the poor conditions of the manuscripts as a result of their owners' neglect, ... the latter, in spite of the harsh environment and the lack of technical expertise, have *de facto* implemented protective measures at various levels.

One of these measures is the “reconstruction” of 208 manuscripts, commissioned by the Habott family and made possible by a number of scholars who, over a period of four years, collected pages that had been scattered around the country. Another is the

¹⁹ Jean-Marie Arnoult is *Inspecteur Général des Bibliothèques* at the French Ministry of Education and Research, a consultant for UNESCO (which commissioned from him a report on the damage to archives and libraries caused by the war in Iraq), and an expert of book and manuscript preservation. His long-time involvement in the Mauritanian libraries is documented, among other things, by a preparatory study on the conservation of the manuscripts in Chinguetti and Ouadane. The report, commissioned by UNESCO, is currently classified.

replacement of manuscripts dispersed after members of a local family, the Ahl Tolba, relocated to Nouakchott or abroad. A third is the traditional bindings and protective sleeves in decorated leather, which another family had locally made for about one hundred of their volumes. Conservation-wise, Sassetti points out the relative advantages of a desert climate, especially the lack of humidity which helps to preserve the older manuscripts, penned on paper made of cotton fibers (whereas paper manufactured in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tends to be less resistant), and warns against the risks of a sudden transition to artificially controlled climatic conditions. In recommending that the manuscripts remain with their owners, as part and parcel of the local community, the study emphasizes the link between ownership and cultural identity, as well as the strong sense of locality underlying both concepts. Similar importance is given to the juridical status of the manuscripts as defined by the Mauritanian law, which makes them eligible for protective and conservative measures.²⁰

The feasibility report prepared by *Movimento Africa '70* includes an action plan addressing each of the five priority issues. The section on culture (*i.e.*, manuscripts and their repositories) recommends that improvements of existing buildings focus on preservation issues (especially protection against the dust) as well as on their accessibility to visitors. At the same time, it proposes the creation of a manuscript center (*Centre d'Archéologie, Codicologie et Herméneutique des Manuscrits Arabes Mauritaniens* or *CACHMAM*) equipped with an exhibition hall, a reading room, and a conservation laboratory where manuscripts can be analyzed, cataloged, preserved, restored, and reproduced. The description of the center reflects Sassetti's expertise and "deep conservation" approach, particularly in the architectural requirements of the building and the guidelines for descriptive cataloging, the latter seen also — and most significantly — as an essential preparation to effective preservation.

The latest and most ambitious conservation initiative is still in progress and, for want of a detailed plan, regular updates or partial results, can be judged only by its avowed purpose and scope. These are nothing less than to locate each individual collection and

²⁰ With the exception of those in national institutions such as the *IMRS*, the *ISERI*, or the National Library, virtually all collections in Mauritania are owned by families or held and managed by religious institutions (such as mosques, *zawiyas*, and *madrasas*) as charitable trusts (*waqf*). In either case the idea of ownership is strongly related to that of benefiting the entire community, an important reminder of the tribal and nomadic roots of Mauritanian society.

Juridically, the status of the libraries and their holdings as "cultural heritage" (*biens culturels*) is defined and protected by two enactments, one (*loi 72.160, 31 July 1972*) regarding specifically the manuscripts, and the other (*arrêté 00589/95, 4 December 1995*) more broadly concerned with the four ksour of Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt, and Oualata. As it turns out, such provisions are not as widely known as one would assume, even to those who should be most aware of their implemental value. Marco Sassetti called my attention to a passage of the *Rhône-Poulenc* report, in which the author condescendingly (and mistakenly) states that "*la notion de patrimoine national n'existe pas sur le plan juridique; il n'y a pas de législation permettant éventuellement un classement au titre de monument historique induisant protection par des dispositions technique*" (the concept of national heritage doesn't exist juridically, as there is no legislation that allows for the classification as historical monument and consequently ensures any protective measures).

repository in the country, to inventory its holdings and to assess their conditions, with the view to planning an appropriate, scientifically sound, and economically sustainable strategy for the long-term conservation of manuscripts. Launched officially on September 15, 2003, with a rather optimistic timeframe of six months, the project is the result and culmination of more than two decades of diplomatic and institutional initiatives on the part of the Mauritanian government, beginning with the ratification of the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural Heritage in 1981. A second significant step was the creation, in 1993, of the *Fondation Nationale pour la Sauvegarde des Villes Anciennes (FNSVA)*²¹ within the office of the Secretary of State, with the mission to plan, organize, and implement initiatives aimed at the protection and preservation of the ancient towns of Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt, and Oualata (Ould Dadi, 2002). This paved the way for the inclusion, in December 1996, of the four *ksour* in the UNESCO's World Heritage List, with the motivation that they "constitute exceptional examples of settlement built to serve the important trade routes of the Sahara Desert, and which were witness to cultural, social and economic contacts for many centuries."²² This allowed Mauritania to apply for funding from the World Bank (IDA) and UNESCO (World Heritage Centre), to implement the pilot project *Sauvegarde et Développement des Villes du Patrimoine Mondial de Mauritanie* (Protection and Development of the World Heritage Towns in Mauritania). However, by the time a loan of five million dollars (#3401-MAU) was approved by the World Bank in May 2000, a more ambitious and far-reaching conservation strategy had been developed by the government in Nouakchott.

Launched in November of the same year, the *Projet de Sauvegarde et Valorisation du Patrimoine Culturel Mauritanien (PSVPCM)*²³ has become the operational framework for the planning, development, and implementation of any initiatives pertaining to the protection, restoration, preservation, and conservation of cultural heritage, both tangible (archeological sites, architectural works, manuscripts, etc.) and intangible (poetry, music, oral tradition, etc.). Among the various initiatives planned by its orientation committee are the creation of six regional museums, a general inventory of Mauritania's archeological sites, and four centers for the care and conservation of ancient manuscripts (in Boutilimit, Kaédi, Tidjikja, and Tichitt); the establishment or rehabilitation of twelve *mahadras* (traditional schools); a workshop to pinpoint the kind and level of legislative action needed to protect the country's cultural heritage; and three conferences: on the future of the *mahadras*, on Mauritanian traditional architecture, and on the protection, preservation, and valorization of its ancient manuscripts. The three conferences took place in Nouakchott in February, March, and April 2002, respectively. The latter was held in conjunction with the opening of an exhibition of manuscripts at the National Museum; its program comprised four workshops (on the identification and accessibility of collections; the conservation of manuscripts; players and partners; and, the valorization of written heritage); and ended

²¹ See <http://www.mauritania.mr/fnsva> (accessed 28 September 2005).

²² See http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=750 (accessed 28 September 2005).

²³ See <http://www.tourath.mr/index.htm>. (accessed 28 September 2005).

with the official adoption of a set of general and particular recommendations for the protection of documents and collections, and for the technical aspects of establishing a library. Drafted by Jean-Marie Arnoult, these recommendations were subsequently included in the conference proceedings, together with a cataloging manual and a glossary of French and Arabic terms used in manuscript conservation (*Actes du colloque international sur le manuscrits mauritaniens*, 2002).

Funded by the World Bank and conducted in collaboration with the *Union Nationale des Associations de Propriétaires des Manuscrits* (National Association of Manuscript Owners), the new cataloging campaign availed itself of 36 scholars who were selected, trained by an expert from the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, and sent in the field with an unusual variety of navigation and orientation equipment, including all-terrain vehicles, compasses, and GPS instruments. (While press releases were eager to stress the training and technological components of the campaign, no mention was made of the technological and methodological aspects of the cataloging process, and no information either was provided on the nature, characteristics, and format of the catalog — or database — to-be.)²⁴ As it turned out, the project unofficially “ended” when the cataloging was still in progress, and Mauritians, after yet another disappointing experience with international cooperation, are now looking for a way to continue the work autonomously.²⁵

In the meantime, the seeds of a new or revived cataloging project could have been planted during the “*Journées des villes mauritaniennes du patrimoine mondial*”, a four-day conference held on April 11–14, 2005, at the *Maison de l’UNESCO* in Paris. Both, the theme and the program of the conference²⁶ seem to show, more openly than in previous incarnations of this event, an overarching political aim, almost an urge, to validate and substantiate the trilateral cooperation (*la coopération tripartite*) between UNESCO, the Mauritanian government, and the World Bank. A cooperation whose results, albeit partial (even questionably and disappointingly so, as in the case of the cataloging campaign), are in fact sampled and showcased by the various presentations, as well as by the accompanying exhibition “*Villes de mémoire — Anciens ksour de Mauritanie*.”

Conclusions and recommendations

In the hundred years since Mauritanian traditional libraries first drew scholarly attention from outside of Africa and the Islamic world, and particularly in the four decades since independence, efforts have been made primarily to locate, assess, and describe their manuscript collections, which for the most part are scattered over a

²⁴ See “*Recensement et catalogage des manuscrits anciens mauritaniens*,” AFP press release, 16 September 2003; “*Démarrage de la campagne de recensement et de catalogage des manuscrits*,” AMI press release, 16 September 2003.

²⁵ Laura Alunno, electronic letter to Graziano Krätli, 9 March 2005. Laura Alunno’s interest in the desert libraries of Mauritania dates back to the early 1990s, when she started visiting the country for various NGOs and development projects. Recently, she has been involved in new project, led by the University of Siena, to catalog the libraries of Chinguetti.

²⁶ See <http://www.mauritania-today.com/francais/news/journees-villes-mauritaniennes/index.html> (accessed 28 September 2005).

desert area twice the size of France, stored away in questionable or alarming conditions (if not literally buried under the sand), and comprise between a few dozen and several hundreds items. While most collections have been inventoried, and some also partially microfilmed, no complete and exhaustive survey has been published yet that systematically and thoroughly describes each individual repository in the country. (The only significant step in this direction remains Geneviève Simon-Khedis' 1994 contribution to the *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts*, which, as we have seen, is far from exhaustive). This is a major setback in the conservation process as it limits the availability of accurate data and relevant information on the repositories and their holdings, particularly their nature and characteristics, typology, geographical distribution, physical and storage conditions.

Another major handicap is the lack of a general catalog of all the manuscripts preserved in Mauritania, added to the fact that many collections have been only partially cataloged, while some haven't been cataloged at all, and there may also be a few whose existence or location remain vaguely or barely known. This is a bit disappointing, not to say discouraging, especially if we consider that cataloging is the area in which most and the best work has been done so far. To be fair, if such work has produced only partial results, and if such results don't stand comparison with standard catalogs of Arabic manuscripts produced in the last 25 years or so,²⁷ this is largely due to the pioneer conditions in which cataloging in Mauritania has been done (and, to some extent, continues to be done), whether in the sun-baked, sandblasted desert towns, with neither electricity nor running water, or in the poorly equipped facilities of national institutions such as the *IMRS* in Nouakchott. But it is also a consequence of the lack of coordination and integration of individual efforts, of their limited scope and vision, and of their being conceived primarily with a narrow bibliographical aim, rather than as part of a comprehensive, long-term conservation strategy.

Another challenge for the bibliographer as well as the curator and the conservator, is represented by the variety of provenance, appraisal, cataloging, organization, and preservation issues arising from the complex evolutionary history and makeup of most libraries, which typically bring together several collections developed over a long period of time, and that in some cases are themselves in the process of being merged with other collections, as a consequence of the recent creation of common repositories in many manuscript-rich areas.

Because of the composite and promiscuous nature of many collections, it is often difficult to separate library from archival materials, particularly when books and manuscripts present, in addition to a commentary on the text, marginal notes or inserts recording information on their owners, family matters, or even local historical events. So far, however, handlists, catalogs and surveys have focused almost exclusively on

²⁷ See, for example, Adam Gacek, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1981), and *Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of McGill University* (Montreal: McGill University Libraries, 1991); Miroslav Krek, *Arabic Script Manuscripts in American Institutions* (Weston, Mass.: ULASMAI, 1992-); and Nikolaj Serikoff's catalog of the Arabic manuscripts preserved in the Wellcome Library, http://library.wellcome.ac.uk/doc_WTL038891.html (accessed 9 May 2005).

manuscripts, ignoring printed books and archival documents, as well as the archival value of library items and the fascinating issue of how and to what extent these different kinds of materials relate to each other, both physically and otherwise. If on one hand such limited scope can be justified in practical terms (manuscripts first, books and archival materials later), on the other it reveals the predominance of literary over archeological interests, and of scholarly over curatorial agendas. A natural, if not inevitable, consequence of the double nature of the book, which is physical container and intellectual content, body and soul, at the same time. The amount and type of data collected for, and provided by, existing handlists and catalogs shows their purpose as being mainly to identify and briefly describe the items listed, without much — or any — concern for their conditions, restoration, and preservation. While this is obviously enough to fulfill the bibliographical needs of linguists, historians, and other literary scholars (whose interests are traditionally limited to, as well as defined by, the intellectual contents of their sources), it scarcely provides the level of information required to develop a sound and appropriate conservation plan.

In order to serve bibliographical *and* curatorial purposes, and to effectively contribute to the preservation of both the intellectual content and the physical characteristics of the materials considered (whether manuscript or printed, library or archival), a catalog should be part of, or rather conceived as, an integrated electronic database providing full bibliographic description as well as detailed information on important aspects such as:

- Repositories (type, characteristics, and purpose; physical and environmental conditions; accessibility)
- Ownership and provenance
- Nature and extent of the collections of which the individual items are part (if relevant)
- Reproduction and dissemination (microforms, digital copies, transcriptions, translations, publications, exhibitions)

Since data and information alone, without the possibility of comparing and combining them, are unlikely to produce relevant knowledge, such a database should be extensively cross-indexed and searchable in a variety of ways, offering for example the opportunity to retrieve items based on their author, date, subject, owner, and repository, as well as their physical characteristics (paper, ink, calligraphic style, etc.), their conditions, and their conservation, reproduction, and dissemination status (including restored, microfilmed, and digitized versions, publications and translations, exhibitions, and inclusion in other bibliographic resources). If, in spite of all the opportunities offered by information technology and the Internet, such a catalog or database has not been conceived yet, let alone developed, it is largely due to the fact that most initiatives of this kind are still planned, implemented, and evaluated by literary scholars (particularly bibliographers and historians) rather than conservators, curators, and librarians. Thence the need to develop and implement a more inclusive approach which sees the book, whether manuscript or printed, as a physical object whose material and technological aspects are as relevant as its intellectual contents.

Such a view would result in the development of catalogs and databases designed to meet a wide range of scholarly *and* curatorial purposes and needs, including those of book historians and archeologists, restorers, conservators, librarians and exhibition curators.

Overall, the case for the manuscript libraries of Mauritania seems to have suffered from the fragmentary and inconsequential nature of many of the initiatives implemented so far, some of which involuntarily duplicated (or intentionally ignored) previous efforts, while others failed as a consequence of their reliance on the shifting sands of international cooperation. Another serious drawback was the inability to promote and publicize, in an adequate manner and to a sufficient degree, a number of noteworthy initiatives and the consequent failure to generate significant scholarly attention and interest, particularly in the English-speaking world.²⁸ As a matter of fact, virtually all literature on the desert libraries of Mauritania is in French, Italian, or Spanish and consists primarily of newspaper or magazine articles.²⁹

The combined disadvantages of linguistic isolation and promotional inadequacy become even more evident by comparison with the Malian situation as represented by the Timbuktu Libraries Project, a comprehensive manuscript preservation and cultural promotion initiative launched in 2000 with funding from the Ford Foundation and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). Masterminded by John O. Hunwick of Northwestern University and R.S. O'Fahey of the University of Bergen, in Norway, two leading authorities on Islam in Africa and the general editors of the prestigious *Arabic Literatures of Africa* series, the project has generated a significant amount of interest, both within and without the academic world, thanks to a sustained promotional effort which included press releases, magazine, newspaper, and journal articles, conferences, seminars, a project Web site,³⁰ and also a fine exhibition of

²⁸ A couple of exceptions are worth mentioning, if only because they confirm this point. The Italian mission "Fly Shuttle 2000," which combined technological innovation, extreme sports, and cultural preservation, is one of those initiatives which, in spite of their originality and results, are typically disregarded by the scholarly community. (In the Spring of 2000, six Italian sailors reached Chinguetti aboard the Fly Flash, a Leonardesque "sail car" designed and built by skippers Mauro Melis and Alessandro Bertagna. The purpose of the expedition was to deliver, in a sustainable yet spectacular way, a hundred pH neutral storage containers donated to the local libraries by book conservationist Marco Sassetti.) A more traditional and scholar-friendly initiative, the already-mentioned traveling exhibition *Sahara: Antiche biblioteche del deserto. Esploratori italiani dimenticati*, does not seem to have traveled far enough to draw more than local attention, thus limiting its impact to the few Italian cities which had the privilege to host it.

²⁹ An English-language exception, although not a scholarly one, is Louis Werner's article in *Saudi Aramco World*.

³⁰ Hosted by the Web site of the Centre for Development and the Environment, *Senter for Utvikling og Miljø (SUM)*, of the University of Oslo, the Timbuktu Libraries Project pages, available at <http://www.sum.uio.no/research/mali/timbuktu/project/index.html> (accessed 28 September 2005), include a detailed description of the project, information of its financing and progress updates, a photo gallery, and links to a variety of scholarly and institutional resources.

manuscripts at the Library of Congress.³¹ These two initiatives further point to the absence, in Mauritania, of a similar effort to collect and make available through a well organized, carefully maintained, and regularly updated “official” Web site, all the information and the documentation produced, and therefore all the explicit knowledge generated, by any study, mission, project, or initiative conducted so far, independently from its accomplishments or its results. The ultimate goal of such initiative should be to provide virtual access to the digitized manuscripts, organized by location (Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt, Oualata, etc.), then by library, then by subject area, genre, and/or topic, and accompanied by a transcription of the Arabic text and a translation in at least two languages, French and English.

As a consequence of this lack of documentary resources, the impression a researcher invariably gets is that, much more than the libraries themselves, the information about and around them seems to be buried under the sands — particularly those of international cooperation and institutional bureaucracy or neglect, which in the long run may prove more treacherous and obliterating than the dunes of the Great Desert itself.

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³¹ *Ancient Manuscripts from the Desert Libraries of Timbuktu*, on display from June 24 to September 3, 2003. The 23 items, 20 from the Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library and three from the Library of Cheick Zayni Baye of Boujbeha, were first digitized and mounted on a parallel online exhibition, which can still be viewed at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mali/> (accessed 28 September 2005).

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