



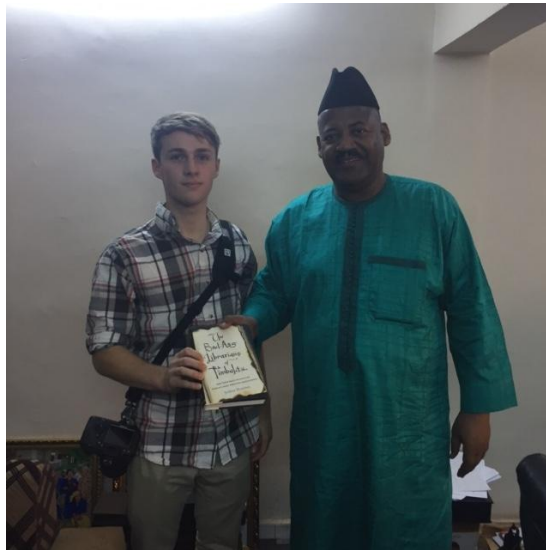
Caravan To Class

February 26, 2017



Dear friends,

On my 3rd trip to Timbuktu in 2011, I was fortunate to be able to tour the Mamma Haidara Library of Manuscripts, the Haidara family collection of ancient Timbuktu manuscripts. I started Caravan to Class from my 2010 trip where the place, culture and people inspired me to get involved in literacy in Timbuktu. However, the heritage of the area, highlighted by the manuscripts gave added important to the needed renaissance of this historically significantly place.



This past week, February 20, 2017, was a special treat, as my son Benjamin and I met up with Dr. Abdel Kader Haidara at his facility, where he is processing a few hundred thousand manuscripts. His team of roughly 100 staff are cleaning, cataloguing, and boxing one of history's most important troves of ancient manuscripts.



My driver was given directions to a nearby school, where one of the guards led us through a labyrinth of streets to the unmarked location where Dr. Haidara's important work is being done. When the work on the manuscripts is finished, they are stored in six different secret storage facilities around Bamako.



These manuscripts, some from as early as the 11th century, are not only important for the cultural heritage of Timbuktu and the entire country of Mali, but for all of Africa and the entire Islamic world. They tell of a golden age of Timbuktu, when the area was at the forefront of advancement in areas like science, astronomy, ethics, law - even women's sexuality and conflict resolution. With so much violence in the Middle East and North Africa, and culture wars within and among religions, the Sufi Islam practiced in Timbuktu, and much of Mali, can provide an important bridge to potentially resolve so many existing conflicts. The manuscripts are a written gateway to explore the strength and wisdom of an important region of Africa in the 12th - 16th centuries. While the writing of all of the manuscripts is in Arabic, many are transliterated from other Northern Mali languages, including Songhai and Tamashek.



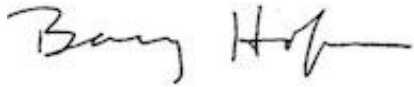
I recommend you read Joshua Hammer's incredible book, *The Bad Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*, to learn the spectacular details of Dr. Haidara's first adventures to collect the manuscripts from countless villages all over Northern Mali. It details his heroic work in secretly getting tens of thousands of manuscripts out of Timbuktu to safety in Bamako, the capital of Mali. As Dr. Haidar told me, "we are in the middle of a five year program to safeguard and digitize more than 300,000 important treasures. When that is finished, we must show the world what exactly is in these manuscripts. That is the ultimate goal."



In the end, the Jihadists did burn some 4,000 manuscripts, the ashes of which I saw myself (at the Ammed Baba Institute, built by the South African government to house the manuscripts) on my 2013 trip to Timbuktu, shortly after the city was liberated by the French. However, not only did he and his team save over 90% of all the manuscripts, but he has saved forever the heritage of his people.

I cannot get out of my mind what Dr. Haidara and his team have done to preserve such an important cultural legacy, again not just for Timbuktu, but possibly for the entire world.

Sincerely,



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