

Melandra Castle Travel Prize Report: Facilitating Manuscript Research in Africa

In the second year of my DPhil, my dissertation research into the intellectual works of an important but lesser-known West African, Saharan Muslim scholar, al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) from what is today Mali has demanded that I travel to a few different manuscript libraries in Africa for access of primary sources. Among these, the Melandra Castle Travel Prize has facilitated my trip to Morocco from March to April for use of two libraries in Rabat: the Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc (or al-Maktaba al-Waṭaniyya li-l-Mamlaka al-Maghribiyya, henceforth BNRM) and the Khizāna al-Ḥasaniyya. Prior to that, I travelled to Mali in December, where I spent two and a half weeks working in the Institut de Hautes Études et de Recherches Islamiques Ahmed Baba (IHERI-AB). This library has been predominantly rescued from the city of Timbuktu in north-central Mali when the city was overtaken by ISIS. The librarians collected thousands of the manuscripts and escaped with them under the cover of darkness, re-establishing the institution in its current location in Bamako, the capital of Mali. Hopefully it will be possible to return again to conduct research in a more peaceful Timbuktu.



A woman riding her moto across the River Niger, Bamako, Mali

In my preparation for both trips, I spent a good deal of time pouring over handbooks of the libraries to know exactly which manuscripts I could find and how to find them. Despite this work, in Mali I found that a few of the manuscripts I most wanted to read were nearly illegible due to water damage or bookworms. Some of this can be seen in the photo to the right in which much of the text on the page has been washed away to effective erasure. Thankfully, the majority of my desired sources were in fantastic condition. It was such an exciting moment to go to my desk each day while there and be humbled to pick up these intellectually valuable works in my own hands. Holding them up to the light, you can see watermarks and other indications of the history of the paper: some coming from European paper mills and some even written on much more modern lined paper, presumably copied from earlier copies repeated over the course of two centuries since the death of al-Mukhtār.



Damage to a manuscript



The peaceful courtyard of a friend's house in Bamako, Mali



My Workspace in IHERI-AB



A door out from Masjid al-Sunna in Rabat, Morocco

My joint award of Melandra Castle Travel Prize covered the majority of my airfare to Rabat, Morocco for my research there. In the Moroccan libraries, the physical manuscripts themselves are generally not provided to researchers. Rather, there is a room with computers and access to requested manuscripts in PDF or high-quality images. The BNRM is easily accessible with only the requirement to leave one's passport at the front desk while using the library. There, I was able to access a few manuscripts that I thought would be more pertinent to my research, but upon reading them I found that they were not as essential. This moment of realisation that my work in that library was not going to be immediately useful in my research was a bit deflating.

The process for access at the Kizāna al-Ḥasaniyya was different and proved to be

immediately rewarding. Because the library is within the palace grounds of the Moroccan king, I had to be required approval by the palace police before entering the grounds. However, the staff of the library were incredibly helpful and to them I'm immensely grateful. Juxtaposed with my experience in the BNRM, in the Khizāna I was incredibly excited to be able to read and obtain a digital copy of a manuscript that is very important for my dissertation and perhaps even for my next envisioned project. In this manuscript, al-Mukhtār describes the way in which Islamic thought is renewed generationally and by individuals, which is integral to engaging with the matter of epistemology in his works.



The courtyard of Masjid al-Sunna, Rabat, Morocco

While I was in Morocco and not at the libraries, I also was able to meet with a number of significant Muslim scholars from Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania who were visiting as guests of the King Muhammad VI for the annual, Ramadan gathering of scholars from around the world, the Durūs Ḥasaniyya. Among them was one of the descendants of the Kunta tribe from which al-Mukhtar al-Kunti hailed. Abdou Rahmane Kounta was expressed his pleasure to learn of my research on the works of his ancestor and encouraged me to also visit the Kunta library and community in Ndiassane, Senegal when able. Also, in my time in Morocco I was able to escape to the countryside for a day trip to visit the important historical and religious site of the *zawiya*, or mausoleum, of Moulay Idris I (d. 791), who is widely regarded as the founder of Morocco. This visit, along with a visit to my family friend's farm in the nearby countryside, was a peaceful retreat from the hectic city surrounding the two libraries back in Rabat.



A peaceful moment inside of the zawiya of Moulay Idris I

I am incredibly grateful for being jointly awarded the Melandra Castle Travel Prize. It has given me a greater

ability to complete my research for my dissertation. I hope my work might bring more awareness to the vibrant intellectual scene in the Sahara and West Africa in the 18th century with particular appreciation for the contribution of al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī.

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All photos taken by me.